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**Person, Place, and Sacrament: Cross-Cultural Healing and Transformation in the
Ayahuasca Shamanism of Iquitos, Peru**

In Iquitos, Peru, Westerners¹, often described as *ayahuasca* tourists, seek out both indigenous and mestizo shamans who will, for a price, lead them in ceremonies where participants partake of a psychoactive brew. The shamans range from the truly knowledgeable to the outright opportunist, and the Westerners range from sincere pilgrim to hedonistic tourist. What is not surprising within these ceremonies is that some Westerners feel they get nothing from the experience but a disorienting and disappointing series of colors and images, most often coupled with violent and unpleasant bodily effects. With the vast cultural differences in worldview, etiology of illness, methodology of healing, understandings of the spiritual, cosmological frames for reality, and even ontological structures of the real, it is far less surprising that there are failures to mediate these gaps than that, with some degree of regularity, there are successes in these mediations. A number of recent research initiatives into this phenomenon, along with decades of consistent anecdotal evidence, have begun to show that, for all of the critiques that can be leveled against the practice of *ayahuasca* tourism, there are a surprising

¹ The terminology of Western and Westerner is problematic as a categorical identification. Many who come to participate in these ceremonies are not, geographically or culturally, “Western”. Similarly, the many sub- and micro-cultures that exist among those even nominally “Western” defy any singular category to adequately define or even describe the many different persons making these kinds of journeys. The term is, however, regularly employed in the discourse surrounding *ayahuasca* tourism to suggest Western-educated persons coming from industrialized social backgrounds. It will be made use of in that context, though relevant distinctions will be noted in the discussion.

number of reports of meaningful healing, personal transformation, and expressions of therapeutic benefit (Fotiou 2010, Winkelman 2005).

It is my intention in this paper to present a series of individually composed descriptive sections, outlining the three fundamental factors at play in these shamanic “healing spaces.” Such a “healing space” in the scope of this discussion can be understood as the space of dialogue, negotiation, and encounter that is manifested between healer and patient within an *ayahuasca* ceremony. Endeavoring to establish a sense of Place, I will begin with a brief history of Iquitos, and an outline of its more modern composition. Continuing from this, I will turn to a sketch of Persons, including mestizo shamans, Shipibo shamans, and Western seekers as they participate in *ayahuasca* ceremonies. This discussion will entail an overview of the etiologies of illness and a general outline of distinct cultural understandings and expectations that inform the participation in these ceremonies for many members of each cultural group. I will then examine the nature of the *ayahuasca* brew in terms of cognitive psychology, in an effort to understand how the psychoactive substance plays its role in the establishment of a cross-cultural healing space. Finally, I intend to propose Michael Taussig’s notion of Montage in terms of *ayahuasca* shamanism (1991), and Joanna Overing’s notions of the shaman as a “maker of worlds” (1990), as anthropological models that reach toward a theory of shamanic action in these cross-cultural healing spaces. The varied forces at play in the history of Iquitos, the diverse cultural backgrounds of those persons involved, and the striking phenomenology of the experience of *ayahuasca*, all find a powerful, and mutually resonant, metaphor in the ideas of collage, montage, and bricolage. It is my intention to explore the possibility that the mechanisms of montage and world-making

may draw elements from personal background, historical and cultural place, and the phenomena of the ayahuasca experience itself, to create a space for healing that is able to be effective cross-culturally. It is not my intention at any point to attempt to transcend the reality of distinct cultural obstacles to shared conceptions of healing, spirituality, and transformation, but rather to suggest that it is just these cultural obstacles and distinctions that can be worked within and through, to act as the components of a newly composed, dynamic, and adaptive shared understanding, within the space of the ceremony. It is an engagement that is less concerned with the specific mechanisms of how shamans heal, and more with how they create and make use of a particular kind of transformational, even liminal, space, where, among other things, healing can occur.

More than any other single aspect, the river defines the city of Iquitos. The river mediates – dividing, joining, marking boundaries and troubling them – between the forest and the city, the *monte* and the *ciudad* (Beyer 2009: 307). The geographical location of the city has situated it as an economic, historical, and socio-cultural crossroads unlike any other in the Peruvian Amazon. Its component parts in terms of persons, cultures, and their histories, come together as a collage of elements. These elements are never wholly subsumed by, or transformed into, one another, and yet are in constant and immediate contact, as parts of a single, mutually-informing, composite and constructed whole. Indigenous, mestizo, and white persons – with histories that have been as broad as they have been bloody – all play roles in the making of this place. Colonialism and the rubber trade have left their marks deeply on the city and its population, with mestizo and *ribereño* cultures plagued by discrimination and grinding poverty. Sorcery, like poverty, is an inescapable fact of mestizo life in Iquitos, with each of these exacerbating, and in

some ways giving rise to, the other. But poverty and sorcery do not provide the whole of the picture, though they do color and underlie many of its realities. Shamanism has flourished in Iquitos, in part to counter just this same sorcery, but also as a source of healing for those who cannot afford, or cannot be treated meaningfully by, Western biomedicine. Such a flourishing of shamanism has given the city a reputation as a powerful center of spiritual activity. The discourse surrounding the spiritual power of local shamans has spread, both through anthropological literature and from the more hyperbolic claims of psychedelic enthusiasts, into the currents of drug, New Age, and other sub-and-counter cultures of the West, drawing an increasing number of seekers, tourists, and pilgrims to the riverside city. It is possible to understand the city's draw as a manifestation of what Allan Morinis has described of other pilgrimage destinations more generally as a kind of "spiritual magnetism" (1992: 5), where the fascination with a particular destination reaches beyond its initial social and cultural boundaries.

Ayahuasca stands out as the single-most sought after 'hallucinogenic' experience to be found in the discourse surrounding Iquitos as a tourist or pilgrimage destination. Shamans and *ayahuasqueros*, or those claiming these and similar titles, are able to provide this service for a fee. Acting as an avenue of economic advancement, such a provision of services has led to an emergent phenomenon of *ayahuasca* shamans who, instead of, or not primarily, working within their own communities, are dedicated to working with and for *ayahuasca* tourists (Proctor 2001). Such tourism has been vehemently decried by a number of anthropologists as exploitative and dangerous, calling into question both the motives of the tourists and the qualifications and ethics of these putative shamans. Undeniably, much of this critique is well founded. And yet, here

again, economic opportunism and Western consumerism do not paint a full picture. Research and case studies are beginning to show that while the pejorative sense of ‘tourist’ is potentially applicable to some, the idea of ‘pilgrim’ may be more useful in understanding the phenomenon under investigation when speaking of Westerners making their way to a place abroad, especially as they go in search of healing and transformation². Certainly, spiritual-consumerism, an ‘orientalist’ (Said 1979) fascination with the remote Other, and broad misconceptions about the history and nature of shamanism all play very distinct roles in the way in which Western seekers conceive of the *ayahuasca*-shamanic experience of which they go in search. There are, however, also very distinct structural affinities between this phenomenon and religious pilgrimage, and even the discourses of religious conversion. In some ways, the very composite nature of the city of Iquitos, the phenomenology of the *ayahuasca* experience, and the intentions, preconceptions, and agencies of the persons involved reflect one another, producing a unique sense of *place*. Such a place is simultaneously physically, socio-culturally, and historically situated, and yet works through, or even transforms, these forces and factors into something that is more than simply their sum.

A Sense of Place

Though the site which was to become Iquitos was initially established in the 18th century as a Jesuit mission, it was not until the 1840’s that the Iquitos Indians settled there with their white *patrón* (Stanfield 1998: 30), founding the city in its modern economic and historical context. Located near the confluence of the Nanay and Amazon

² See Ivakhiv 2003 for a broader treatment of the themes of New Age tourist and pilgrim.

rivers, and less than eighty miles from where the headwaters of the Ucayali and Marañón themselves converge, Iquitos has been, from the very beginning, located at a key geographical point for trade flowing through the Peruvian Amazon. Class and racial divisions, still evident today, were likewise present from the beginning, where a small white elite economically, socially, and politically dominated and oppressed the significantly more numerous indigenous and mestizo populations (Ibid. 30). Though Iquitos was well situated for commerce, until the advent of the Rubber Boom, the city remained relatively small. By 1864, however, little more than twenty years from its founding, steamboats, factories, docks, and manufacturing centers were brought to the city by British companies and the Peruvian navy, bringing rapid growth with them (Ibid. 31). As the demand for rubber increased throughout the world, Iquitos was inundated with thousands of new immigrants, decimating indigenous populations via violence, slavery, and disease, and radically altering the political and cultural realities of those who remained (Ibid. 36). By 1905, Iquitos was a booming port town, where

Indians and partially acculturated *cholos* formed the working class, Chinese merchants and restaurateurs figured prominently among the petty retailers, while European merchants controlled the most lucrative wholesale trade. Along the muddy streets, one could see – along with the harried Indian porters and the pigs routing through garbage – newcomers from Germany, Brazil, Spain, Italy, France, England, China, Portugal, Morocco, Columbia, Ecuador, as well as a few from North American and Russia. (Ibid. 108)

Notably, it was not only the swelling population, systemic racism, and the acculturative impact of Western goods that so distinctly shaped much of what modern Iquitos was to become. The techniques of rubber tapping themselves, as they were practiced in the Amazon, played a significant role. Tapping a *Hevea* tree, which produced a finer quality of latex, was something that could be done sustainably, where a

single tapper, working in relative isolation, could tend a few hundred trees at a time, spread over many dozens of acres of forest. The trouble with this was that even with a hundred trees or more, *Hevea* trees, while sustainable, could only yield roughly 5-7 pounds of dry rubber per tree annually. On the other hand, *Castilloa* trees, while they had to be felled, killing the tree, could produce upwards of 200 pounds of latex in a matter of days. The *caucho* model of scouring the forest for these immense trees caused the vast majority of rubber tappers to be constantly wandering, untraceable, forever in search of these lucrative but highly perishable resources. As Stanfield says, “The mobility necessary for caucho collection resulted in a less stable lifestyle, one that proved highly disruptive for the caucheros, the environment, and Amerindians alike” (1998: 24). It was in large part this wandering of the caucheros, however, and the contact with indigenous peoples that it facilitated, that played a significant role in the cross-cultural sharing of shamanic techniques that, at least initially and in part, lead to the *vegetalismo* shamanism of the mestizo population in Iquitos (Beyer 2009: 301)³.

When the Rubber Boom did finally collapse around 1912, it was due, again, to the details of harvesting the latex from the trees. *Hevea* trees are susceptible to a particular form of leaf blight that is common in the Amazon, making plantations of them unfeasible, as the blight passes from tree to tree. However, in Southeast Asia, India, and Africa, this blight does not exist. Vast plantations of the sustainable *Hevea* trees were able to be planted in these locations, and as they both produced a finer quality latex than the

³ While *vegetalismo*, or mestizo shamanism, may have had some of its traditions retained from many original indigenous traditions of acculturated populations as they became indistinguishable from mestizo in *reberreño* life, much of the *vegetalismo* shamanism that became established in Iquitos was drawn from the return of these rubber tappers, as they brought back what they had learned in their time away (Luna 1986: 31).

Castilloa trees and did not require anything like the same labor to acquire from the forest, the costs of the latex from these plantations so drastically undercut the Amazonian market that it simply could not compete. Almost overnight, the boom went bust. The commerce that had sustained Iquitos vanished, and thousands of migrants and tappers were suddenly without any other home, and without economic prospects. Some, certainly, returned to their original homes, but many moved to Iquitos, or slightly up and down river from the city, establishing small settlements near the banks of the river. Swidden gardens, fishing, foraging in the forest, and game hunting became – much like those of the lives and homes they had left behind – the economic survival strategies for thousands of people, but now without the social and cultural infrastructures that had supported these ways of life prior to the boom. These conditions have changed little, even to the present day. As Beyer remarks of the continuing economic divisions and juxtapositions in the life of the city:

The contradictions remain. The people who inhabit the jungles surrounding Iquitos have no electricity or running water except the river. Yet they can watch the latest North American programs on blaring old televisions when they come to town, by dugout canoe, to pick up supplies or sell jungle produce. (2009: 293-294)

Traditional ways of living stack up next to modern technologies, the selling of plants and produce gathered from the forest takes place jostled up against satellite dishes, laptops, cell phones (Ibid. 293).

These disparities point toward the poverty that gives rise to the practices of sorcery that so mark life in Iquitos, and as is true of many indigenous cultures of the Amazon, envy is, in many ways, at the root of it. Though the emotion of envy itself is not necessarily thought to be the direct cause of misfortune, envy, resentment, and

jealousy – all encapsulated by the term *envidia* – are where the desire to cause harm, and to inflict suffering on another begins. As Beyer suggests, in Iquitos, “Life is perceived as a zero-sum game. To receive more than a fair share of good is necessarily to deprive another” (2009: 137). It is poverty and its attendant miseries, however, that underlie much of the desire to make use of sorcery in social settings. Most mestizo inhabitants of the city have little to no expectation or hope of economic advancement. Education is extremely limited, and the classist and racist structures in the city keep many, if not most, of the inhabitants from receiving even what is potentially available. Medical care is virtually unavailable, whether due to the doctors’ inability to understand or deal with culturally-described illnesses, or due more pragmatically to the inability of the patients to pay for expensive prescriptions. Caught up in the “social disintegration that marks this culture of poverty” (Dobkin de Rios 1972: 65), jealousy over love rivals, the uncertainty of being able to acquire even basic necessities, and domestic instability of all kinds ensure that want and need are constant companions in all social interaction. When these needs and desires are not able to be met, but the needs or desires of another seem to be, the disparity is not one that can be written off as random chance. As with many indigenous and mestizo societies of Amazonia, everything that happens is considered to have been intended by someone or something. Bad luck in business is not a sorry happenstance, but an evil fortune sent by a *brujo*, the manifestation of someone’s envy or resentment for some perceived disparity, or breach of egalitarianism (Beyer 2009: 132). When snake bites, falls, and bad machete accidents occur, it is not a question of *how* such a thing happened, but is rather a question of *why* (Luna 1986: 120), or, perhaps more explicitly, *why me* and *who was responsible*.

Sorcery and poverty are in many ways the boundary terms for mestizo life in Iquitos, providing both its shape and limits. In the Peruvian Amazon, being mestizo “is a complex identity, a form of hybridity, contradictory and ambivalent” (Beyer 2009: 294). Though ostensibly referring to those of “mixed blood,” the reality is that “mestizo” covers a wide range of persons, from acculturated indigenous peoples to the varying mixtures of white and indigenous lineages, and pertinent to life in Iquitos, the varying shades of the color of skin (Luna 1986: 31). This hybridity echoes the city itself in some ways, situated as it is on the river, which is the essential mediator between city and forest. If the river negotiates the bounds of city and forest, the mestizo identity negotiates the boundaries between indigenous and white, in some cases incorporating both, and in others marking them as distinct (Beyer 2009: 307). The river, again, being the dominant feature, it is perhaps no surprise that a term often interchangeable with mestizo is *ribereno*, or “riverbank dweller” (Ibid. 296). In reality, *ribereno* culture extends far beyond the *mestizaje*, being composed of a broad range of people of many different ethnic or historical origins, all living in very similar ways. Speaking Spanish, wearing European clothing, making and working in swidden gardens, hunting, fishing, foraging in the forest, and traveling the river in *peque-peque* and/or dugout canoes are all the hallmarks of *ribereno* culture in the Peruvian Amazon (Ibid. 297). As noted previously, the origins of this pattern of living are in many ways the result of the collapse of the Rubber Boom, rubber tappers heading back toward the city, and migrants with nowhere else to go, establishing new lives on the banks of the river, near enough to the city for trade, but far enough to carve out a living from the land.

Though the majority of the population of Iquitos is culturally mestizo, a segment of the population does self-identify as indigenous. Shipibo women can often be seen selling handcrafts and wares by the side of the street (Fotiou 2010: 29), and a number of successful Shipibo shamans have migrated upriver from Pucallpa to be nearer the tourist clientele (Ibid. 121). Though there are other indigenous groups that have historically lived – and still live – nearer Iquitos than the Shipibo, the Shipibo who have migrated to Iquitos are particularly relevant in the discourse surrounding *ayahuasca* shamanism. Having a reputation as the most powerful *ayahuasqueros* (Ibid. 29), Shipibo shamans are sought out by both Westerners and mestizos alike. Though many of the healing techniques made use of by Shipibo shamans are similar to those used by mestizo shamans, the foundational cosmologies and theories through which Shipibo shamans conceive of and perform their work differ in significant ways from those of mestizo shamans. Cultural differences, both in regard to cosmological structures and social life, are certainly present between mestizo and indigenous inhabitants of the city. However, as described before in terms of *ribereño* culture, what marks out difference between indigenous and mestizo in the daily life of Iquitos is not necessarily visible characteristics, nor the claims to “blood” or lineage. As Beyer states, “some Indians have European ancestors, and many mestizos do not. The criteria defining these two groups are cultural, and, increasingly, socioeconomic” (2009: 295). This is not to suggest that indigenous identities are so porous as to become undifferentiated from mestizo identities, but rather that these identities may be defined more by those living them, than by externally ascertainable or assignable criteria.

Whether in search of shamanic healing or some other diversion, Westerners arrive in Iquitos by the bus full, driven in from the single open-air airport, past the rusted hulks of abandoned planes out in the tall grasses beyond the landing strip. Ecotourism, drug tourism, and sex tourism are all well known features of the tourist-trade in Iquitos, and though these kinds of tourism are beyond the scope of this paper, to what degree there is overlap and interplay with the forms of tourism under discussion is certainly a worthy subject for further investigation. Though many terms have been suggested for the phenomenon wherein Westerners arrive in the Amazon to participate in shamanic rituals – not the least of which is ‘drug tourism’ as put forward by Marlene Dobkin de Rios in a number of publications – in this paper I intend to make use of Fotiou’s term ‘shamanic tourism’ (2010: 2). Though undoubtedly there are Westerners for whom the somewhat pejorative sensibility of ‘drug tourist’ is appropriate, there are many others for whom the motivations that they self-report do not lend themselves to its applicability. As Michael Winkelman says of his case studies among just these kind of ‘shamanic tourists’

Contrary to the characterization as “drug tourists,” the principal motivations can be characterized as: seeking spiritual relations and personal spiritual development; emotional healing; and the development of personal self-awareness, including contact with a sacred nature, God, spirits and plant and natural energies produced by the ayahuasca. (2005: 209)

Self-reported motivations such as these belie the notion that the intentions for use are “simply to get high” (Dobkin de Rios 2009: 166), and while such hedonistic pursuits may be the case for some tourists, it cannot be supposed that this is the case for all, or even necessarily the majority, of them. Repeated case studies and anthropological field work have suggested that the motivations for these tourists are not exclusively hedonistic in nature, but seem to reflect deeply felt desires and

drives toward enhanced spirituality, healing, and personal transformation (Fotiou 2010, Winkelman 2005). To that end, the other often considered term, 'ayahuasca tourism,' will not be made use of either. Though it, like 'drug tourism,' is likely to describe some of those participating in these experiences, in the sense that what is sought out is more akin to *transformation* than simply to the seeing of visions, the term 'ayahuasca tourism' shifts the focus of the participants' intentions from the spiritual to the phenomenological, making the term reductive and inhibiting its utility. It is worth noting that the terminology of 'tourist' is problematic, and though this paper will make use of 'shamanic tourist', the term 'tourist' itself does retain a trace of preemptive judgment about the goals of a given Western seeker. A tourist, in these cases, is as likely to be a pilgrim, a term which may present a less biased and more nuanced understanding of the goals, especially in line with the stated motivations, of Westerners seeking out these experiences⁴. However, supplanting the term tourist with that of pilgrim unfairly prejudices the debate on the other side as well. To place the discussion on more neutral ground, the term 'seeker' will be used as a potentially viable substitute. A tourist may simply be seeking diversion, while a pilgrim may be seeking the transcendent. While I will not suppose to close the debate by inserting 'pilgrim' in as the descriptor of Westerners participating in *ayahuasca* shamanism in Iquitos, neither am I comfortable labeling them as simply 'tourist.' Though I will employ Fotiou's term of 'shamanic tourist' from time to time in specific contexts, more broadly, when speaking of Westerners in Iquitos for the purposes of healing and transformation while working with an *ayahuasca* shaman, I

⁴ See Cohen in Morinis 1992 for an anthropological analysis of what distinguishes a tourist from a pilgrim.

intend to make use of the term 'seeker' to keep the discussion more terminologically aligned with the intentions of this investigation.

Finally, though Keith Basso's work was performed in cooperation with the Apache in North America (1996), and thus geographically somewhat far afield from the current discussion situated in Peru, the powerful, almost lyrical, style of Basso's work presents a way of understanding place, how it lives with people, how it is remembered, how it is known, and how it actively shapes lives, persons, and memories, such that it cannot be left absent from the discussion. As noted early on, it is the river that most defines the city of Iquitos. As the preceding discussions of geography, history, and socioeconomic situatedness have endeavored to show, the "making of place" is of the utmost importance in an understanding of the city. The river is a physical force, but also a metaphoric boundary between the forest and the city, vital to *ribereño* lives, shaping their possibilities and prospects, sustaining and providing for daily needs, and acting as the mediatory presence between all other aspects of life, both self and Other. Though mestizo culture may not reflect Apache in terms of complex place names and histories-in-the-landscape, I would argue that the landscape, its immediacy, its daily relevance, and its profound *presence* – especially in terms of the scale and power of the Amazon river itself – is central to the ways in which the places of social and cultural life are made in the Peruvian Amazon. Iquitos is a crossroads, a place where cultures, peoples, rivers, forest, and city all meet, exchange with, and inform one another. While the history of these meetings has often been brutal, it has no less established a place that is as much defined by the heterogeneous nature of its components as it is by their production of a whole. The place of Iquitos is made by, and continues to shape, its inhabitants, as being a

historical and socio-cultural crossroads, a boundary place much like the river which defines it. That shamanism, a phenomenon explicitly linked with boundary states and mediation, should have arisen here as an experience that reaches beyond its cultural foundations and out into the Western imaginary is fully in line with the way in which place both shapes and is shaped by the lives of those who live within it.

A Shared Healing Myth

Whether shamanic ritual or a prescription for pills, sharing a belief in the causes and cures of illness is a crucial understanding to be held common between patient and healer. A worldview that allows pathologies and the etiologies of particular illnesses to be meaningfully communicated, at least in part if not full, from the doctor, shaman, or healing specialist to a patient, regardless of the mode of operation of any particular treatment, has shown to be crucial for the efficacy of therapeutic relationships (Walsh 2007: 59). If this is the case, how is it possible, then, for *ayahuasca* shamans, both indigenous and mestizo, to act as healers for Western seekers? Westerners, whether they are in search of healing on physical, psychological, or spiritual levels, by and large do not share indigenous or mestizo worldviews. This is not a suggestion that all Westerners can be meaningfully grouped together to imply a single common, or even dominant, understanding of the world in physical, psychological, or spiritual terms. Western culture is composed of innumerable sub-cultures and micro-cultures, identities that are shaped and reshaped throughout the lifetimes of those who comprise them. But even in the cases of those more ‘open’ to spiritual notions that may conflict with the broader assumptions of scientific rational-positivism and mechanistic views of the universe – such as New

Age influenced sub-cultures, pagan and neo-pagan movements, and the like – Westerners are unlikely to share common notions of the ‘spiritual’ with the shamans they seek out. Ideas of ‘energies,’ chakras, karma, martial-arts-influenced ideas of *chi*, and New Age terms like the ‘higher self’ find themselves mixed and matched with a great deal of novelty in the minds of many Western spiritual seekers, developing personal theories that are as much self-help rhetoric as they are spiritual paths (Beyer 2009: 353). Such a statement is not meant to denigrate or cast any aspersions on the validity of any given personal spiritual insight, but rather to suggest that notions of the spiritual in Western parlance may have little in common with indigenous and mestizo notions of living spiritual entities such as the *chullachaqui* who haunts the forests, or the dangerous and seductive water-persons like the *yukaruna*. To make use of a term common in modern anthropological discourse around a new “respect and relationship” animism, indigenous and mestizo shamans are far more likely to consider the spiritual world not in terms of mystical transcendence or self-realization, but more in terms of relationships with other-than-human-persons (Harvey 2006). In similar ways, the categories of pop psychology and self-help – such as personal growth, emotional cleansing, and the like – that are often raised in the testimonies of Western seekers cannot be expected to be part of the worldviews of the indigenous and mestizo shamans. These worldviews, while both ostensibly ‘spiritual’ in nature, leave open the question of how space for healing is to be established that can be meaningful and effective for both healer and patient.

Marlene Dobkin de Rios – a medical anthropologist whose work has been foundational in the study of *ayahuasca*, especially in and around the city of Iquitos – has been one of the most strident critics of ‘drug tourism.’ It is because of its distinct

relevance to the subjects at hand, both thematically and locationally, that I will primarily focus on her work in this discussion, and by no means is it my intention to ignore the ideas or contributions of other anthropologists working along similar lines. Her critiques of the phenomenon of ‘drug tourism’ continue to provide some of the greatest challenges to any possibility of meaningful cross-cultural healing in shamanic experience, especially in Iquitos. Among these critiques, one of the most difficult to grapple with is the doubtful authenticity of the practitioners she has labeled ‘neoshamans’ (2009: 128)⁵ – men (for it is almost without exception men instead of women) who have no formal shamanic training, who have not undergone the extremely rigorous traditional diets and apprenticeships, but nonetheless offer what they at least profess to be *ayahuasca* to unwary Westerners, whose own motivations and intentions may be similarly questionable. Those that she describes as ‘neoshamans’ are, by and large, strict opportunists, with interest not in healing, but in the money to be made at the expense of naive Western seekers. It is an enduring and unsolved problem, a phenomenon still readily found in Iquitos, which has the potential to leave real and long-lasting psychological and emotional damage in its wake. Dobkin de Rios has also pointedly described *ayahuasca* and drug tourism as “merely a footnote to drug trafficking around the world” (Ibid. 169), suggesting that Westerners seeking out these experiences are “urban educated men and women who tour Latin American simply to get high” (Ibid. 166). She has asserted that the majority of Western motivations for seeking out *ayahuasca* shamanic experience stem from “psychological states such as low self-esteem, values confusion, drug abuse... and chronic consumerism” (1994: 16). Between the

⁵ This use of the term ‘neoshaman’ should be understood as distinct from its use in terms of Westerners participating *as* shamans, such as in Michael Harner’s Core Shamanism (Harner 1990).

charlatanism of certain *ayahuasqueros* and the purported “empty self” (Ibid. 16) of the Western seeker, these critiques seem damning for any hope of engagement between healer and patient. Indeed, more fully, she suggests

Unlike some anthropologists, who hope for a mutual learning experience culturally to occur between people who differ ethnically (see Geertz 1966), I think that there is little hope for communication between the drug tourists and the Amazonians. The Amazonians' tradition of ayahuasca use is linked in a matrix dealing with the moral order, with good and evil, with animals and humans, and with health and illness, which has little correspondence or sympathy with the experiences of people in industrial societies. (Ibid. 18)

While there are myriad documented cases of the charlatanism she describes, and certainly an “empty self” may describe a number of Western seekers, this leaves, as Fotiou suggests, little space for any valid or meaningful spiritual experience (2010: 126), which is problematized by the remarkable number of reports of the efficacy of these cross-cultural shamanic healings. But if research suggests that cross-cultural healing and the facilitation of personal transformation is not only viable, but accomplished with some degree of regularity, in these *ayahuasca* shamanic ceremonies (Fotiou 2010, Winkelman 2005), how can this be reconciled with the critiques that Dobkin de Rios leverages? If a shared healing myth does not exist between the healer and the patient, if the patient’s motives may not in all cases be ‘pure,’ and the healer’s authenticity and ethics are sometimes in doubt, how can the consistency with which healing does seem to be effected be accounted for?

Though an answer may not be easily suggestible, there are a number of ways in which these critiques can be addressed, if not wholly resolved. The potential charlatanism of untrained ‘neoshamans’ is something that has been attested to by a significant number of anthropologists and even other well-established shamans. In an

interview, a well known Shipibo shaman named Guillermo Arévalo describes what he calls “folkloric shamansim” (Dobkin de Rios trans. Rumrill 2005: 203). He opposes this to traditional shamanism, suggesting that “folkloric shamanism” has been designed to appeal to Western sensibilities, for the purposes of extracting money. However, by that same token, Arévalo himself is the owner and operator of an *ayahuasca* lodge and retreat by the name of “Espiritu de Anaconda,” which is well known for its involvement with Western seekers, having been the subject of a number of articles, and even two feature-length documentary films. In many ways, the “authenticity” of a given shaman may simply be something that has been decided in a similar way in indigenous societies: effectiveness. Arévalo, in a separate interview, suggests that “Right now, in the Amazon, we can’t say that there’s any pure tradition. It’s mixed” (Beyer 2009: 281), and as Fotiou suggests, some of the concerns over charlatanism in *ayahuasca* shamanism are based in “critiques that themselves suffer from naive notions of authenticity” (2010: 3-4). This is not to downplay the reality of the harm that can be wrought by those who attempt to make use of powerful psychoactive substances without the proper training, especially when they are called on to act as the leader or safeguard in these situations. Such actions can have very real and very dangerous psychological consequences for those involved. Rather, it is to suggest that establishing authenticity in shamanic practice has traditionally been a troubling subject, even for indigenous communities. Ultimately, it is those shamans who cannot heal, who diagnose illness incorrectly, or fall prey to other tell-tale signs of fraud, who are castigated, and suffer the loss of their clientele. That this kind of self-regulation can prove effective in indigenous communities, of course, does not suggest that the transient nature of the tourist’s involvement affords the same opportunity

for this kind of systemic self-correction. It may however imply that opportunism and fraud are not phenomena that are wholly new to tourist-centric shamanic practice, either.

In his case study of the attendees of an *ayahuasca* retreat in Brazil, Michael Winkelman found that for many Western seekers, the motivations they gave for their desire to participate in an *ayahuasca* shamanic retreat were distinctly different than the consumerist-oriented “empty self” previously noted. He states of these motivations and intentions that the primary reasons included

establishing spiritual awareness and relations and personal spiritual development. For many, the motivation included emotional healing, and for some, assistance in dealing with substance abuse issues. Others expressed the desire to get a personal direction in life, to engage in a personal evolution. Only one respondent mentioned hedonistic reasons, i.e. the visual effects produced by ayahuasca. (2005: 211)

This suggests that while the hedonism supposed of those who would “tour Latin America simply to get high” may hold for some of those seeking out these experiences, many others have motivations more in line with healing and personal transformation, hallmarks of many spiritual pursuits. While Fotiou (2010) and Winkelman (2005) have some of the clearest data on the subject, a diverse range of anecdotal accounts can be put forward from many internet forums⁶ and even feature-length documentaries (such as *Vine of the Soul*) that all suggest similar patterns of a desire for healing and transformation as the primary stated intentions for participating in these experiences. Guillermo Arévalo, the Shipibo shaman noted previously, has stated of his personal experience with Westerners that

Principally, these tourists come to try to resolve personal problems. They say it is a self-encounter. They want to find the solution to their own problems and then to liberate themselves from those problems or the psychological traumas that they

⁶ See <http://www.erowid.org/> and <http://www.ayahuasca.com/> as prototypical examples.

suffer. Others look for spiritual responses. They want to know the true spiritual path. (Dobkin de Rios trans. Rumrill 2005: 204)

These statements make it difficult to countenance the suggestion, put forward by a number of anthropologists, that a desire to participate in an *ayahuasca* shamanic ceremony is purely the product of a consumerist-driven need to fill an “empty self” with goods and experiences. In many ways, this discourse describes many of the same themes that have been elaborated in the anthropology of pilgrimage, especially as it is compared to the modern tourist. The questioning of the sincerity and authenticity of motivation that seem to be at the core of the critique of this kind of shamanic tourism are very resonant with many critiques leveled at tourism more broadly, and are subject to much the same problematization. Engaging in such a problematization is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Morinis (1992) and Ivakhiv (2003) for more extensive treatments of the subject.

If the questions of the authenticity of both shamans and seekers have been addressed – though in no way closed or wholly answered – there remains perhaps the most significant obstacle in the path of the healer-patient relationship, bringing the discussion back around to where it began: the shared healing myth. Though cultural expectations and understandings between shamans, both indigenous and mestizo, and the Western seekers who arrive in Iquitos are without a doubt distinct from one another, such expectations and understandings are not static, nor are they absolute. As Fotiou suggests,

South American shamanism has always been about intercultural exchange and has drawn symbols and power from a variety of sources. More than sharing sociocultural content, *ayahuasca* shamanism provides an intercultural space for westerners and locals to dialogue. (2010: 4)

As can be seen in a wide variety of ethnographic material from the Peruvian Amazon,

vegetalismo – mestizo shamanism – is voraciously syncretic⁷ (Beyer 2009: 341), absorbing and transforming outside influences from sources as widely dispersed as technological advances, philosophy, metaphysical theory, psychology, science fiction, Christian eschatology, and New Age conceptions of the self. South American shamanism can be understood, broadly speaking, as a methodology of mediation with the Other, an ability of the ritual specialist to incorporate, transform, become, and resist the influences, ideas, and power of the Other. To that end, while Western psycho-spiritual discourse may be populated by ideas not readily or originally available within the discourses of *ayahuasca* shamanism, many have become rapidly absorbed and integrated into the rhetoric of healing and transformation. Beyer, like many other anthropologists and scholars⁸, speaks of the mestizo shamans with whom he worked as making use of – side by side with water spirits and spirits of the animals – Martian teachers, aliens that spoke computer languages, and entities that could manipulate electro-magnetic forces (2009: 339). And this movement is not only seen to occur in one direction. Fotiou asserts that “there is a two-way exchange and westerners adopt shamanic discourse as well, especially one that involves relationships with non-human persons” (2010: 2). In this way, the gap that exists between the healer’s worldview and the worldview of the patient can begin to narrow. Incorporating and making use of not just the terminology, but also the interconnected concepts and their cosmological or ontological implications, of the

⁷ This use of the term “syncretic” is not intended to introduce notions of authenticity or purity into the discourse at this point, but rather to acknowledge an active and agentive multivalency. *Vegetalismo* broadly speaking does not have a set of orthodox beliefs that it must sustain as authentic in order to retain a coherent identity, but is rather oriented toward maintaining and enhancing an efficacy in healing and practice. While questions surrounding tradition vs. innovation can certainly be raised, as this paper endeavors to show, syncretism in mestizo shamanism may deal more with a mediation with the Other than questions of traditional systems of belief.

⁸ Cf. Luna and Amaringo 1999.

Other-in-relationship provides a way, not around, but *through* the cultural barriers that might otherwise prevent a meaningful exchange from taking place. A shared healing myth is a powerful component of any therapeutic experience, and while Westerners and shamans may not participate in identical, or even similar, cultural backgrounds, it may be possible for the dialogue between them to establish a new, dynamic healing myth as they proceed.

If it is possible to establish a shared, dynamic, healing myth between healer and patient within an *ayahuasca* ceremony, then the cultural preconceptions and expectations that seem most useful to explore toward an understanding of how these might come together seem to be the etiology of illness and the theories underlying the methods of healing. In short, what causes illness or distress, and what alleviates the same, will act as windows into the distinct cultural categories of healer and patient. The causes and cures will be examined for mestizo shamans, Shipibo shamans, and Western seekers in turn. This examination will be significantly truncated for the sake of brevity and space, though it could readily support a much more extensive investigation.

Luis Luna, in his extensive work on *vegetalismo*, has described an etiology of illness among mestizo shamans that covers a lengthy list of sources from which one might be made to suffer some kind of disease or sickness (1986: 120). Needs of space prohibit the reproduction of the rather extensive discussion here, but by way of summary, the sources of illness can be broadly divided between two categories: spirits and humans. Sorcery, in its way, is at the root of all illness, the question being only whether it was precipitated by an offended spirit, or a resentful human. Spirits of specific plants, animals, and trees can all be sources of illness, though the spirits of the dead, the

yakaruna of the river and the *sacharuna* of the forest can all be responsible for casting spirit darts, and even for abduction, both of souls and whole human-persons. Humans can, likewise, be responsible for illness, sending witchcraft, causing bad luck, praying evil prayers, chanting evil spells, or even physically placing poison where it will come into contact with another. Just as *envidia* is a social reality in mestizo life, so too is the notion that much of the spirit world is “basically hostile to human beings” (Ibid. 120), requiring constant vigilance, right action, and the intervention of specialists to maintain health and good fortune. When health has been compromised from one of these hostile sources, it becomes necessary to seek out a shaman to work a cure. While biomedicine, when available, is able to alleviate the symptoms of certain illnesses, it is important again to recognize that the important question being asked is less *how* one became ill, and more *why*. Shamans have the ability to engage with an illness both to alleviate the physical difficulty, but also to address the social *cause*. This is perhaps more evident if it is recognized that, as Luna asserts, “the idea of healing also includes the manipulation of spiritual forces in the alleviation of financial and emotional problems” (Ibid. 32), such that biomedically-addressable illnesses are not explicitly distinguished from psycho-spiritual, and even fortune-related, troubles in mestizo life. The techniques employed to effect healing in these cases are very similar to Amazonian shamanic techniques more generally. Songs – in this case, *icaros* – are sung, *mapacho* tobacco smoke is fumigated over the patient, rattles are shaken and made use of to direct spiritual energy by the shamans, and spirit-darts, or *virotas*, are sucked from the patient, the evil either being sent back to the source of the malevolence, or simply ‘away.’ It is worth noting that while animals, plants, and trees are considered as potential sources of illness, in mestizo life

“sicknesses are almost universally caused by the malevolence of other people” (Beyer 2009: 132). As described previously, *envidia* goes hand in hand with sorcery, and it is primarily envy, jealousy, and resentment that are thought to be the real source behind the significant majority of illness in mestizo social spheres.

Traditionally among Shipibo shamans, while both spirits and humans are likewise considered as potential sources of illness, the ways in which one might become ill from these sources are distinct from the etiologies present among mestizo shamans. Much of the shamanic discourse around healing among the Shipibo is concerned with the patterns of *quené*, or complex geometric designs as they are envisioned by shamans during *ayahuasca* ceremonies (Gebhart-Sayer 1985, Illius in Langdon 1992, Brabec de Mori 2009). These designs are understood by the Shipibo shamans to be capable of both healing and harming, such that a patient may be afflicted by the *quené* sent by a spirit or sorcerer, but then ultimately healed or restored by the *quené* applied by a healing shaman. These designs are intimately related to songs, sung and whistled by the shaman as he or she goes about the process of healing, or even by the sorcerer during harming. The songs, especially when performed in the context of *ayahuasca* ritual spaces, elicit these complex patterns and visions, as a form of mediation with the spirits. As Illius asserts, “The sick person’s designs are distorted and must be restored to return to health,” (in Langdon 1992: 65-66), suggesting that these patterns are in some ways bound up with the composition of the person. Other authors similarly note that when the patterns and designs of these songs have been used to cure or heal, they are “sealed” into the patient, becoming part of their makeup. When new illnesses occur, or sorcery is worked against a patient, even other shamans from the one who originally healed the patient can see the

healing work that was done, and can see the new illness or sorcery as a “smearing,” “clouding,” or “distortion” of these earlier designs. While many of the techniques made use of by Shipibo shamans in healing – fumigation of *mapacho* tobacco smoke, the prescription of diets, the utilization of rattles and songs, and the sucking out of illness – may be similar to techniques utilized by other shamans in the Amazon, the way in which these illnesses are understood to operate – how these designs relate to spirits, shamans, and sorcerers, especially through song – is distinctly different. Though certainly other Panoan peoples share certain similar understandings of these designs and their spiritual and therapeutic potentials (see Lagrou in Santos-Granero 2009 for an exploration of these themes among the Cashinahua), these ideas are not shared unilaterally by mestizo shamans by any means, and certainly are not found in the worldviews of Westerners who participate in *ayahuasca* ceremonies with these shamans.

Before discussing etiologies of illness and theories of the modes of healing among Western seekers, it seems prudent to address a question that lingers within any such discussion of Western involvement in shamanic experience: why shamanism? There are many other spiritual paths available in the religious marketplace, many of which make claims to healing and personal transformation. While undoubtedly certain residual colonialist attitudes about shamanism being ‘closer to nature’ – in the sense of indigenous peoples being supposed in the Western imagination to be ‘without culture’ – can be pointed to in the preconceptions of many Westerners, any such fascination with a ‘primitive’ other seems unlikely to sustain the degree of interest and enthusiasm that shamanism, in its many guises, has continued to excite. Michael Harner has suggested that this sustained and increasing interest in shamanism is because “many educated,

thinking people have left the Age of Faith behind them. They no longer trust ecclesiastical dogma and authority to provide them with adequate evidence of the realms of spirit” (1990: xi), proposing instead that Western seekers tend to be more interested in directly experiencing and testing the “limits of reality,” since, as he states, shamanism is “a methodology, not a religion” (Ibid. xii). Fotiou similarly asserts that

Ayahuasca experiences are attractive to Western people because, in a way, they give them direct access to the spiritual and the divine within. There is no intermediary as in organized religions. (2010: 130)

Even the terminological debates surrounding psychoactive substances reflect changing values and ways of understanding. The term *entheogen*⁹ has been circulated more recently, intended to imply something like “generating the divine within.” The term has begun, at least within certain circles, to replace others like “psychedelic,” “hallucinogen,” “psychotomimetic,” and the heavily prejudicial “drug.” While, on its own terms, “entheogen” too is prejudicial in the sense that it suggests a sacredness or spirituality to these substances that may still be open to debate, the intention in most cases is simply to shift thinking away from the more clinical and techno-scientific interpretations of these substances, and turn them more toward the understandings that have, in more traditional cultures, driven their use. The difference between a drug, a psychedelic, and an entheogen, ultimately, is in how it is conceived of and how it is used. Though such an aside may seem peripheral, I would argue that an understanding of the words practitioners choose to describe their experiences directly impacts the question of “why shamanism.” A direct, personal contact with these powerful experiences is an undeniable draw for

⁹ In many religious contexts, the term ‘sacrament’ is made use of as well. For a more detailed analysis of the use of the term sacrament vs. sacramental in sociological terms as it applies to *ayahuasca*, see Baker 2005.

many who have felt alienated by the strictures and dogmas of organized religion.

Whether through entheogens, trance-inducement by drumming, or other techniques designed to instigate experience beyond the bounds of normal, waking consciousness, the appeal of shamanism to precipitate healing, transformation, and communion with the spiritual or divine has a distinct and undeniable attraction for many Western seekers.

While undoubtedly many, if not most, Westerners participating in shamanic ceremonies tend to have biomedical understandings of disease, including notions of germs, bacteria, viruses, infection, genetic dispositions, and other similar concepts, it is not usually, or at least not primarily, these more physical or biological illnesses for which Westerners come to the Amazon in hopes of a cure. The wide varieties of technologies and chemicals that are available to Western biomedicine are, in most cases, seen as sufficient for treating explicitly physical ills by most Westerners. More common are psycho-spiritual complaints such as depression, anxiety, disaffection, alienation, and disconnection – a sense of being lost, or lacking something quintessentially ‘spiritual’ to give meaning or fulfillment to life. Asked if he saw a spiritual or psychological crisis in European and North American communities based on those participants with whom he had interacted, the Shipibo shaman Guillermo Arévalo responded “That’s what I see. It is clear among many people. Indeed, many of them also suffer from depression. Others are enslaved by their work. Others are hooked into materialism and they have been neglectful of the spiritual part of themselves” (Dobkin de Rios trans. Rumrill 2005: 204). This is made clear again in the words these seekers make use of themselves, when describing their motivations for participating in *ayahuasca*-shamanic ceremonies. As summarized by Winkelman, these are

seeking spiritual relations and personal spiritual development; emotional healing; and the development of personal self-awareness, including contact with a sacred nature, God, spirits and plant and natural energies produced by the ayahuasca. The motivation and perceived benefits both point to transpersonal concerns, with the principal perceived benefits involving increased self awareness, insights and access to deeper levels of the self that enhanced personal development and the higher self, providing personal direction in life. (2005: 209)

The illness, or psycho-spiritual lack, in the experience of these Western seekers is in many ways pointed to by the rhetoric used to describe motivations and benefits. An unfulfilled or flagging spirituality and personal development, emotional wounds, and a distance or disconnect from the sacred – all of these seem to serve in the place of an etiology of illness in these cases. While the terminology may ring of pop psychology and self-help, the illnesses engendered from these sources are insistent enough to warrant seeking help outside one's own cultural boundaries, suggesting that the issues as they distress individual participants' lives are real enough. While disaffection or alienation may be a particularly culture-bound illness, it is not necessary to understand it as any less real than *anorexia nervosa* experienced by young women in the West (Beyer 2009: 152), or the threat of, and affliction caused by, sorcery that pervades so much of the social discourse in the Amazon.

This sketch, however, does not end neatly. The etiology of illness, coupled with the theories underlying the modes of healing, for shamanic worldviews, find logical compliment in one another. That is to say that the causes of illness fall within a worldview that is matched by the modes of healing that are appealed to. But for Western seekers with illnesses described as spiritual – those requiring emotional healing and personal transformation – complimentary modes of healing within their own culture do not seem readily available. Whether this is due to an actual societal or cultural lack of a

healing methodology, or due instead to the idiosyncrasies of personal taste and preference, these Western seekers find themselves with an illness or lack where the specialists involved in this potential methodology for healing, shamans, do not share the same understandings and expectations about the world. Whether intentionally or no, the question of a shared healing myth returns. Despite the fact that certain pieces of terminology and conceptual material do seem to cross cultural boundaries and allow a new healing myth to be dynamically created, the problem is not wholly resolved. What facilitates this dynamic creation of a new healing myth? Though both shamans and patients may make an effort to describe intentions and understandings to one another in terms that make sense to each, it is unlikely that every shaman and every patient have the time or the means to actively structure a full range of understandings that would supplant the need for a truly shared worldview. To answer this, one of the original questions outlined in this investigation is drawn nearer – the possibility that it is less important to understand, in these cases, how shamans heal, than it is to understand how they make use of a particular kind of transformational space. But to make such a suggestion worthwhile, it is first necessary to describe the actions of the brew, *ayahuasca*.

The Psychology of the Ayahuasca Experience¹⁰

This is perhaps the moral of the whole story. The cross-personal commonalities exhibited in Ayahuasca visions, the wondrous scenarios revealed by them, and the insights gained through them are perhaps neither just psychological, nor just reflective of other realms, nor are they ‘merely’ a creation of the human mind.

¹⁰ Many analyses of the phenomenology and psychology of *ayahuasca* begin with a detailed account of how the harmine and harmaline alkaloids potentiate the DMT that is thought to produce the majority of the visual features of an *ayahuasca* experience. Such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, and would not significantly aid an understanding of the shamanic healing space. Likewise, a detailed phenomenology of the stages of *ayahuasca* inebriation, common visual motifs and themes, and the somatic effects of the brew, while related to the subject at hand, do not fall within its scope.

Rather, they might be psychological *and* creative *and* real. But when we appreciate this, so much of the fundamental notions by which we view both mind and world have to be considerably altered. (Shanon 2002: 401)

While certainly all perception of and action in the world is to a large extent culturally situated, there are certain strictly cognitive effects of the *ayahuasca* brew that allow it to shake culturally inculcated structures and constants, radically unmaking the ego and identities of the participants for some finite duration during the experience. The shaking of these constants places participants into a cognitive situation where they are more ‘open’ to the incorporation of ideas, suggestions, images, and ways of thinking that might otherwise seem alien and inassimilable to “normal” consciousness. Charles Grob and Benny Shanon’s psychological analyses of *ayahuasca*’s effects provide a window into how psychoactive components of the brew alter both perceptive and emotional structures. Many of the characteristics described by Grob hold true for altered states facilitated by entheogens in general, while those described by Shanon are specific to *ayahuasca*.

Grob outlines ten distinct characteristics “understood to be virtually universal to such altered state experience[s]” (in Metzner 2006: 75). Though some of these are undoubtedly more relevant than others for the current investigation, as a brief overview, the characteristics he reports as “universal” fall into the following categories: 1) alterations in thinking, 2) alterations in time sense, 3) fear of loss of control, 4) changes in emotional expression, 5) changes in body image, 6) perceptual alterations, 7) changes in meaning or significance, 8) a sense of the Ineffable, 9) feelings of rejuvenation, and 10) hypersuggestibility (Ibid. 75-76). Just this list alone goes some way toward understanding how a “shaking up” of consciousness might be precipitated in line with

cross-cultural communication of meaning, but a few of these categories are worth noting specifically. Changes in body image entail the “dissolution of boundaries between self and others” where an individual identity or ego-self is no longer understood to be wholly distinct from the surrounding world, and the persons in it (Ibid. 75). When taken together with the experience of hypersuggestibility – which, as evidenced by the name, implies a profound increase in the capacity for suggestion to alter both perception and attitude – this indiscernability of distinct identity creates a situation in which ideas, even socio-culturally abnormal or uncommon ideas, can be incorporated with a marked rapidity. As these ideas are suggested and incorporated, the potential for the meanings associated with them, and the significance of the ideas themselves, can take on an extraordinary weight, such that certain words, phrases, and images can profoundly shape both an immediate experience, and potentially a subsequently altered worldview. If, as the entheogenic experience begins to close, a feeling of rejuvenation or rebirth is felt by the participant, the potential for the weight of suggestions made, or concepts encountered in the ceremony, to remain with the participant for a more extended duration is significantly enhanced. Though no single characteristic of the entheogenic encounter alone presents a mechanism by which cross-cultural dialogues might effect healing, taken together as they act on a participant in a ceremony, such an outcome becomes more plausible.

If these aspects of entheogenic encounters in general have the potential to produce a space where the transformation of identity may occur, *ayahuasca* has a number of unique cognitive effects that allow it to act as a “perceptual *bricoleur*” (Beyer 2009: 235). While an analysis of purely perceptual alterations under the influence of a psychoactive would do little to further an understanding of how a healing space is facilitated by

employing *ayahuasca*, it is important to remember that these alterations of perception are, in most cases, matched by similar alterations in cognition. This is to say that the psychological processes hinted at by the visual effects noted are not limited only to the visible percepts, but extend into the cognitive functions of the participants as well, such that while a given ‘hallucination’ may be recognized as such, it is also very often taken as simultaneously ‘real’ within the space of the ceremony (see Beyer 2009: 233 for examples of this phenomenon).

Benny Shanon outlines a number of cognitive-psychological effects of *ayahuasca*, only a very few of which will be able to be explored within the scope of this paper. The most important of these, for the purposes of this discussion, are superposition and collage, the power of metaphor, and the Double-Face configuration. The phenomenon of superposition can be described as one where a given set of ‘real’ objects coincide with, but are not overlapped or mutated by, visionary objects, with a semantically meaningful relationship between the two. An example given by Shanon describes an experience wherein bodies were witnessed as hanging from a large tree. The tree was ‘real’ in the sense that it corresponded to a tree that was visible and solid outside of the entheogenic experience, but the bodies that were hanging from the tree did *not* correspond to a reality able to be experienced outside of the altered state (2002: 78-79). What is important to note in such a case is that the bodies were *hanging* from the tree, a relationship that, in effect, ‘makes sense’ for the coupling of bodies and trees, inasmuch as the bodies were not floating like balloons, dancing on the branches, or anything of the sort. This is an example of what Shanon has described as a relationship of “*collage*” (Ibid. 79), insofar as the aspects of the vision were drawn both from something in the ‘real’ world as well as

from the visionary experience, and yet combined in such a way as to produce a result that had semantic meaningfulness. In line with the semantic meaningfulness of a particular vision, the power of metaphor stands out, according to Shanon, as “one of the most important mechanisms for novelty in cognition” (Ibid. 336). In terms of cognitive psychology, Shanon describes metaphor as that feature of cognition which allows agents to “draw new distinctions and induce new ways of looking at things”, wherein meaningful features “are not selected out of prior, given semantic sets; rather, new semantic differentiations are made up and new semantic features are generated” (Ibid. 336). Shanon proposes that *ayahuasca* plays directly upon this cognitive capacity for metaphor and the generation of novel semantic categories and connections, such that previously unrelated concepts and ideas can be drawn into relationship with one another in ways that are both meaningful and durable, potentially beyond the termination of the *ayahuasca* experience. Closely associated with the capacity for metaphor to draw schematic sets into novel relationships with one another is the Double-Face configuration, where existing semantic content is recognized to bear secondary or tertiary meanings not previously experienced or expressed. Shanon describes this as the mechanism that is at work in many puns and jokes, where a word, phrase, or even whole scenario is constructed and presented in such a way that the crux of the joke or pun lies in shifting the expected result or intention to suggest a novel connection between disparate semantic categories or domains. Words that can mean multiple things, utilized in an identical phraseology, may impart different and diverse meanings, dependent on the context within which they are deployed. Superimposing the meaning of a given articulation from one semantic domain onto another produces novelty in the more

extended context. Scenarios and images may suggest outcomes that can be suddenly inverted or transformed upon the interruption of a discordant piece of information not originally present. *Ayahuasca*, Shanon suggests, plays on this capacity of language and image in cognitive apperception to present unexpected insights and interruptions into seemingly familiar conscious structures and ideational schemas. This allows participants in an *ayahuasca* experience to understand long-held identity structures and inculcated cultural values in radically different ways, even to the point of begin able to choose to retain, modify, or abandon them.

A more full treatment of the data gathered by Shanon, the situations in which he gathered it, and the striking nature of both the commonalities and differences of the experiences reported by his informants cross-culturally is beyond the scope of this paper, but, however brief, the preceding has attempted to establish some of the cognitive effects charted in his study as they relate to the space of healing between patient and shaman in an *ayahuasca* ceremony. When coupled with the “universal” characteristics of entheogenic experience as detailed by Grob, a broad outline emerges that suggests, from a psychological perspective, that cross-cultural communication and dialogue may prove to be a real possibility in an *ayahuasca* ceremony. With this in mind, and considering the concepts of bricolage and collage that have both been raised in a psychological context, I intend now to return to montage and world-making in anthropological discourse, coming back to where the intentions of this investigation began.

Healing, Montage, and World-Making

This investigation has, internal to its own structure, attempted to act as a kind of montage, presenting fragments and selections from contexts seemingly distinct from one another, in order to produce an image from the component parts that come together to form a new whole. A history of place, a traversal of the etiologies of illness among differing cultural groups, and the psychological effects of a psychoactive brew, have been drawn together, placed such that they are intended to simultaneously reflect one another, but still distinguish differences of origin and aim that in some ways make them largely incommunicable one to the other. In the structure of the paper I have attempted to reproduce, in a limited way, the same montage or collage of factors that are present in the spaces of healing and transformation that shamans in Iquitos are asked to hold open for a wide variety of clients in an *ayahuasca* ceremony. But why montage, as a form? In a way it reflects a desire not to neatly fit these distinct factors into a false narrative, and an attempt to allow their mutual resonance to arise, or fail to arise, of their own accord, without wedging them uncomfortably into molds they may not adequately fill. But perhaps more to the point, it is that it is montage itself that is the resonance between these factors, the play of montage and collage within the construction of each in its own terms, that acts as the commonality between these. The city of Iquitos has been drawn from a wide variety of social, historical, cultural, and economic forces, a patchwork of indigenous, mestizo, and European elements, strung together to produce a place that is remarkable for its role as a crossroads and borderland. Shamans have, perhaps definitionally, always been those to traverse any such borderlands, transgressing boundaries between self and other, merging, resisting, but above all *mediating* between

these. That the persons of indigenous and mestizo shamans should take up residence and ply their trade in a physical, historic, and economic crossroads should not seem in anyway surprising. Nor should the presence of the Western others, as they seek out something definitively unavailable within their own cultures. If Iquitos has historically been a crossroads – socially, economically, and culturally, though its function as such has been at times notoriously violent and cruel – then its continuing nature as such a crossroads, if now for different reasons and appealing to different needs or desires, should likewise not prove unexpected. And as *ayahuasca* brings together healer and patient, it too acts, within the psychologies and cognitive structures of each, as its own force of collage and bricolage, restructuring and changing previous arrangements of ideas and concepts, integrating those which had perhaps previously seemed alien or incompatible.

But can montage be that mechanism, within a healing space opened and held by the shaman, that brings together aspects and elements of worldviews and conceptual categories, of life experiences and unspoken hopes, that can ultimately effect healing? In his extraordinary *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig suggests in terms of *ayahuasca* ceremonies that

The ‘mystical insights’ given by visions and tumbling fragments of memory pictures oscillating in a polyphonic discursive room full of leaping shadows and sensory pandemonium are not insights granted by depths mysterious and other. Rather, they are made, not granted, in the ability of montage to provoke sudden and infinite connections between dissimilars in an endless or almost endless process of connection-making and connection-breaking. (1991: 441)

The sacred brew of *ayahuasca*, in the space between the shaman and the patient, acts as a potent force of montage, actively bringing together concepts, cosmological referents, and ontological structures in novel ways, such that, as an adept within the navigation and

utilization of the properties of this space, the shaman can effect the healing and, in the rhetoric of Western seekers, the personal transformation of the patient. Such a notion, while in a significantly different ethnographical context, is not dissimilar to the World-Making proposed by Joanna Overing in terms of the *ruwang* of the Piaroa, working with concepts drawn from Nelson Goodman's philosophy (1990). Overing suggests that the power of the shaman has to do with his or her capacity to build meaningful worlds from pieces of other, pre-existing worlds. These new worlds, as they are developed in accordance with an attempt to alleviate the suffering or heal the illness of a particular patient, are structured in ways that allow pieces of myth, history, and even daily life to be drawn from their respective wholes, and repositioned together in ways that allow their novel arrangement to uniquely and explicitly address the situation of the patient in question. What is crucial to understand, even in such a brief outline of Overing's ideas, is that these worlds are *real* to both the patient and the shaman, that they are not derivative or secondary spaces. All worlds, in Overing's explication of Nelson Goodman's philosophy, are ultimately constructed from pieces of other worlds, giving no primacy – and crucially, no pejorative cast – to any world so constructed. This is to say that this new world developed on the principles of *montage* is no less valid or meaningful than a “prior” world from which its aspects were drawn, but is instead simply another resonant world that informs, even as it potentially contrasts with and contradicts, the worlds from which its aspects were composed. Such a constructional notion of reality echoes what Santos-Granero has described as “Amerindian constructional cosmologies” (2009: 3), wherein all cosmological structures, even as they produce the lived and historical world, are compositional or constructional in nature, drawn from pre-existing

features and elements. According to Santos-Granero, creation in many Amerindian cosmologies is not *ex nihilo*, but always constructed from prior or previous elements (Ibid. 4), suggesting that both the primordial and manifest worlds are ultimately the product of a function of montage, just as the healings of a shaman may be said to be. If the world itself can be understood as having been constructed through a function of montage, healings and other transformations seem within the realm of plausible as well.

Such a suggestion can be both elaborated and problematized. As shamans have long been the mediators with the Other, and have in many ways drawn power from just such an Other, syncretism of ideas is not only to be expected, but is wholly consistent with the operation of shamanism (Luna 1986: 35). This is to say that the incorporation of New Age terminology, the images of biomedicine and technology, and other such syncretic actions of indigenous and mestizo shamans is wholly in line with the mediatory capacity that in many ways defines the position of the shaman. At the same time, real questions can be raised as to what extent cultural barriers can be crossed, even granting the assumption of a healing space participating in montage. Piers Vitebsky has raised problems centered around the ‘holism of worldview’ that shamanism, especially indigenous shamanism, has traditionally entailed, and how central such a holism of worldview is to the efficacy of shamanic action (in Harvey 2003). Even in Overing’s work we can see an echo of this, as the “new worlds” that are constructed from aspects of others must be constructed in such a way as to remain meaningful and viable in terms of their constituent parts, and the uses to which they are put for healing. This is to say that while cultures may be acted in and through to produce new worlds, there are still cultural rules or understandings that will ultimately determine the viability and coherence of any

newly produced world through these actions of montage. Not all constructions are meaningful or acceptable in all cultural contexts. As Vitebsky's argument suggests, albeit in terms of Western-oriented neo-shamanisms, if the shamanic worldview is not understood as potent in all aspects and spheres of life – physical, psychological, spiritual, social, cultural, economic, etc. – then its power to act is significantly curtailed. This does not, I would argue, imply that such a “healing space” of person, place, and sacred substance cannot be effective, but rather that it must be a space of negotiation and dialogue, one that does not attempt to transcend cultural barriers, but rather to integrate and absorb them – to build bridges out of the bricks of the walls.

There is so much more that can, and perhaps should, be said. There are questions about the ethics of shamanic tourism, about what the impact on local cultures might be. As indigenous and mestizo young people become interested in *ayahuasca* shamanism more to pander to tourists than to work in their communities, there are real questions about how such tourism may impact these traditions, and whether that impact will entail, in some ways, the destruction of their cultural meanings, as they are applied more and more to clientele whose rhetoric, problems, and ills do not fit with traditional structures (Proctor 2001). Neither is the charlatanism and opportunism noted by Dobkin de Rios simply ameliorated by the plausibility of real and meaningful healing in some cases. But beyond the potential dangers or troubles surrounding the dynamics of shamanic tourism, there are theoretical questions that invite further investigation. If, as Fotiou asserts, the “question is no longer ‘if’ indigenous knowledge is going to be shared with outsiders but how and under what terms” (2010: 309), then as a religious or spiritual phenomenon, this shamanic tourism has intriguing correspondences to other religious phenomenon.

Pilgrimage, especially in terms of kind of structuralist division between sacred Center and a fascination with the distant Other (Cohen in Morinis 1992), bears directly on this kind of religious phenomenon, especially as modernized Western seekers trouble the notion of any original, cultural Center. In a similar way, the dialogues surrounding *healing* and *personal transformation* that are so ubiquitous in the reports and testimonies of Westerners involved in shamanic tourism (Fotiou 2010, Winkelman 2005, *Vine of the Soul* 2009, *Other Worlds* 2002) echo similar refrains in the testimonies of those that have undergone religious conversion (see Steigenga and Cleary 2007 for an elaboration on the discourses of conversion as they are found in Latin America). That the intentions and outcomes of participants in shamanic tourism may have an interplay with the same motivations, expectations, and experiences as those undergoing religious conversion suggests that there may be an affinity between the two experiences, though inasmuch as shamanic tourism does not require or present a model for converting *to* any given religion or set of beliefs, the differences may be as informative as the similarities.

Ultimately, it may well prove to be the relationality of the experience, the space between shaman and patient – the healing space created and held by the shaman, making effective use of *ayahuasca* to open dialogue and negotiated senses of the meaningful or “real” with the patient – that effects the power of the ceremony. To bring together that which did not before fit, to assemble a world from the self-help concepts of a patient, from the other-than-human spirits of the shaman, from the colonialist preconceptions of a Westerner, from the dynamic nature of tradition, and from the visual and auditory noise of the river and forest and city and unmuffled moto-taxis and carts of fruit and satellite dishes and dugout canoes and cheap cell phones – it is just this that is that essence of

montage. Where this space holds, and where the power of montage can be brought to bear – that power that is, as Taussig suggests a kind of “Epic theater aimed not at overcoming but at alienating alienation” (1991: 329) – social and cultural barriers may not cease to matter, but may be transformed and transmuted into a new shared myth.

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