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Gender Dynamics and Cosmology within Mestizo
Ayahuasca Shamanism, Iquitos, Peru.*

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**Dismantling the Myth of “Mother Ayahuasca”:
Gender Dynamics and Cosmology within Mestizo Ayahuasca Shamanism,
Iquitos, Peru.**

By Emily Sinclair

submitted to the Graduate School of Anthropology for Durham University in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

2024

Abstract

This dissertation examines the impact that non-local ayahuasca participants have had on mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos, Peru, with a focus on gender dynamics and cosmology. My thesis, based on 24 months of anthropological fieldwork between 2017 and 2021, argues that the commodified image of “Mother Ayahuasca” as a purely benevolent feminine being has been propagated through the Westernization of ayahuasca shamanism and its commercialisation for Western clientele with an increased emphasis on healing. Yet, as well as *curanderismo* (healing) practices, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism involves *brujería* (sorcery), and furthermore, sometimes sexual seduction and abuse, which I argue are rife across the ayahuasca industry.

Mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the Peruvian Amazon is rapidly transforming through the influx of Western participants and the growth of a global ayahuasca industry during the last 30 to 40 years. Iquitos, Peru, is renowned for being an ayahuasca tourism hub and the epicentre of global ayahuasca use, whereby Western spiritual seekers arrive with what are often romanticised perceptions of Amazonia and ayahuasca. In participating in ayahuasca shamanistic *curaciones* (healing) rituals, Westerners are also participating in local practices that by default include *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) and “love magic”, a usual part of local seduction practices, but also, in some cases, related to occurrences of sexual abuse.

While Western influence and urbanization have increased women’s participation in ayahuasca practices, ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region remains dominated by patriarchal structures. Indeed, Western ayahuasca drinkers seeking alternatives to oppressive patriarchal social and religious systems are often met with or re-create the abuses of patriarchy in this alternative context.

Yet, in contrast to typically Western perceptions of dualities of gender and cosmology being fixed, as represented by the commodified image of “Mother Ayahuasca” associated with “the Divine Feminine”, nature and healing, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism entails shifting dualities of gender and cosmology in a more volatile dynamic relationship. Ayahuasca is capable of manifesting in male or female forms and *curanderismo* and *brujería* are not gendered domains but historically and contemporarily interconnected and in some cases the same practices.

Drawing on Amazonian, feminist, gender, and ecological studies, and positioning itself within the anthropology of the non-human, my ethnography emphasizes the relational aspects of ayahuasca shamanism and the importance of shamanic agency in relation to ayahuasca. It analyses the contradictions between Western conceptions of ayahuasca shamanism and local mestizo beliefs and practices and tracks continual exchanges of understanding between Western apprentices and their *maestros* (teachers). My analysis reveals how hybrid forms of ayahuasca shamanism continue to emerge within the tourism setting and how alternative cosmological perspectives can co-exist in such hybrid spaces.

In the current climate of globalisation involving the ecological and MeToo movements, ayahuasca shamanism serves as a vehicle for the cross-cultural exchange of social, cosmological and medical beliefs and practices, and has brought feminist issues to the fore. However, I argue that the growth of the ayahuasca industry has also exacerbated ‘darker’ elements of ayahuasca shamanism, contributing to occurrences of *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) and sexual abuse. My analysis highlights the presence of shamanic warfare at the core of ayahuasca shamanism, showing how it manifests presently within the ayahuasca industry around individual practitioner’s battles for power, status, money, and, I argue, also women. It also records the emergence of novel interpretations of healing mental health problems within *brujeria* frameworks.

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Acknowledgements

This research is the result of many wonderful connections with friends, willing participants, colleagues and family, both inherited and acquired, to whom I wish to express my gratitude. I am not able to name all who have helped to shape this research and enriched my personal journey along the way as the list is endless, but I acknowledge that this work bears the fruits of many fleeting as well as lasting encounters in the field and beyond.

I would like to thank my family, especially my Mum, my Dad, and my sister for supporting me to follow my dreams to travel to Peru and immerse myself in ayahuasca shamanism and research, despite the subject of this dissertation being far outside their comfort zones and the journey taking longer than any of us envisaged! My sister Elizabeth deserves special mention for her unconditional sisterly love and support, which has given me the strength and means to complete this project and seen me through the hardest of times.

I would also like to thank my *familia peruano*, *mi maestro* Don Luco, Lili, and their wider family who welcomed me into their home and their lives, making this research possible and giving me a family in unfamiliar territory. They will always have a special place in my heart. I am especially grateful to Don Luco for introducing me to “*el mundo espiritual*” (“the spiritual world”) and for all that he taught me in ceremony and in life, and to the many *pasajeros* who came through our centre and shared their stories, sufferings and joy with me. To assist and support you was one of the most fulfilling roles I have played.

I am sincerely grateful to all the *ayahausqueros* who allowed me to participate in their ceremonies and willingly offered their knowledge and perspectives. I am grateful also to my interviewees for sharing their stories, and insights, and especially to the women who had the courage to share their pain with me. Many of the conversations that most influenced this research project were unrecorded liaisons in ‘*The Bistro*’ and around Iquitos with the long-

termers and returning visitors in the community, which provided thrilling conversation both on and off topic. I am particularly thankful to this community, which became my community, and which provided the fuel for this dissertation and with friendships I will always cherish. Thank you all for accompanying me on this crazy and wonderful ride of my life! I extend special thanks towards those who shaped this research and made its completion possible: Chris, Olimpia and Ian for initiating me into Iquitos; Sally, my fieldwork companion throughout; Freddie, one of my greatest teachers - in this research, but more-so in life; Ella, Victoria, and Denes, for being there when it all fell apart; Nick Nott, Nick Nak, Jann and Angus for their support and friendship during the final chapters of this journey, and especially Nico (“*Padre*”) who passed during its final stages - the most incredible friend and spiritual companion throughout and beyond

This research was further made possible by the support of Durham University including funding through various grants in the early stages. I am grateful to my supervisors Paolo Fortis and Andrew Russell for their support, managing to keep me on track whilst negotiating the numerous unexpected twists and turns this research and my life took throughout, and to Bia Labate for helping me to have a voice in the field and providing an outlet for my research through *Chacruna Institute*. I extend immense gratitude to my friend and mentor, Daniela Peluso, a wonderful woman and *maestra* in her own right whose support and encouragement enabled me to reach completion. I also want to thank my examiners Françoise Barbira-Freedman and Jed Stevenson whose instruction was of great benefit to this work, and Simon Bailey, whose guidance greatly assisted me in bringing this project and process to a close. Finally, my friend Alexandra Mee whom I am sure I was destined to meet at Durham and whose persistent support and encouragement with this project (and everything else) was felt throughout, even from the other side of the world.

For my Dad and for *Padre* (in memoriam),
my spiritual guides in life and in death,
and for Aeva,
mi maestrasita curandera.

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Chapter Eight: Sexual Abuse within the Ayahuasca Industry

Alongside being an agent of healing and *brujería*, ayahuasca is also an agent of romantic and sexual seduction, and attack. Ayahuasca is a prominent ally in the Amazonian practice of “love magic” (“*la ciencia de amor*”) whereby romantic and sexual partners are conjoined through the use of spells, and a tool for healing relationship and sexual trauma for many Western participants in shamanic retreats. However, it is also a vehicle through which *ayahuasqueros* and ceremonial leaders sexually abuse participants in ceremonies and related contexts. Within the climate of the #MeToo movement in recent years it has become common knowledge that sexual abuse of predominantly female participants in ayahuasca shamanism is a widespread phenomenon. As in other situations sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts is essentially an abuse of power whereby perpetrator shaman and ceremonial leaders take advantage of the uneven power dynamics that usually exist between them and ceremonial participants in ayahuasca shamanism (Peluso 2014, Chacrana 2019; Sinclair & Labate 2019).

While figures are hard to come by, sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism has seemingly increased within the context of the global ‘ayahuasca industry’ (Peluso 2014, Chacrana 2019; Sinclair & Labate 2019; Peluso, Sinclair, Labate & Cavnar 2020). In this chapter I will address reasons for this through evidence from my fieldwork. I build on work that argues that non-local participants in ayahuasca shamanism are particularly vulnerable to sexual attack due to their unfamiliarity with local culture and practices in Amazonian settings and argue that the lack of protection and support that has been available to them in these settings exacerbates these risks. Furthermore, I build on work that recognises a wide range of patriarchal structures or tendencies and argue that the commercial organisation of the ayahuasca industry has intensified the potential for sexual abuse to take place and contributed to its suppression in Iquitos touristic contexts. My discussion scrutinizes local beliefs and practices regarding ayahuasca that are related to sexuality and

romantic love, particularly in relation to Westerners' perceptions of ayahuasca and shamanism. I also examine ideas about medical and ethical codes of conduct, addressing how these different beliefs and practices interact, conflict, overlap and develop within touristic ayahuasca settings.

Following my fieldwork in Iquitos I became involved in public action work to combat sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts and led an initiative with the *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Medicines* to raise awareness about the problem of sexual abuse across the 'ayahuasca community'. Through a collaborative effort with colleagues, researchers and experienced participants in ayahuasca shamanism we produced a set of guidelines aimed at raising awareness about the problem of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings and providing guidance to help keep participants safe (Chacruna 2019). I distributed the guidelines on the ground in Iquitos as well as more widely (Sinclair 2019).

My discussion in the last section of this chapter will focus on this work, addressing the debates around gender and cross-cultural dynamics, responsibility and consent that this project raised, highlighting difficulties faced with communicating across cultural boundaries on these issues and implementing change on the ground. My discussion throughout this chapter highlights the 'grey areas' and blurred boundaries that exist in touristic ayahuasca settings around issues of sexual seduction and abuse being heightened by the presence of multiple and sometimes contradictory moralities related to different cultural perspectives and practices and the diversity within such perspectives and practices.

The problem of sexual abuse in ayahuasca communities is widespread covering diverse global settings (Peluso 2014; Méndez 2015; Fernández 2018; Sánchez Sarmiento 2018; Benedito & Böschmeier 2019; Brown 2020). Indeed, my own research, including fieldwork in the Iquitos region and engagement with victims and survivors of sexual abuse across

global settings through my involvement in the *Chacruna*' sexual abuse awareness initiative (Chacruna 2019), suggests that most women with long-term experience in ayahuasca communities have experienced some form of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings or know another woman who has. While steps are being taken to address the issue of sexual abuse within the ayahuasca community, changes are gradual and abuse of power in all its forms remains prominent across ayahuasca shamanism. I begin this discussion by outlining the kinds of sexual abuse that typically take place in ayahuasca contexts.

Sexual Abuse in Ayahuasca Contexts

Sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts ranges from unwanted sexual advances, to molestation, to violent acts of sexual intercourse through brute force. Research in diverse, global settings has revealed typical scenarios in which sexual abuse takes place across these settings within the context of ayahuasca based practices (Chacruna 2019). Scenarios of abuse are sometimes orchestrated by predator shaman who serially abuse women in ayahuasca ceremonies and related contexts.

Unwanted invasive touching of intimate parts during supposed 'healing' sessions by *ayahuasqueros* and apprentices, or other ceremonial facilitators is seemingly the most prevalent form of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings. These transgressions often occur when participants are heavily under the effects of ayahuasca, typically towards the end of ceremonies when it is usual for individual healings to take place and other participants may be resting or asleep. Women report feeling confused and in shock in the event of abuse, since "*it happens before you know what is happening*", as one of my interviewees described it. Acts of molestation may also occur during individual 'healing' sessions outside of group ceremonial contexts when participants are usually alone with the *ayahuasquero*. These may be presented as necessary complementary healings involving shamanic techniques, massage

or different forms of energy healing; may take place during plant *dietas* or rituals with other psychedelic plants; or may involve the use of other psychoactive substances such as DMT or other synthetic chemicals, as is also quite common within the Iquitos milieu.

Coercion of women into sexual acts by shamans and ceremonial facilitators under the guise of healing is another typical scenario for sexual abuse within ayahuasca shamanism. In these instances, women are often told by the shaman they need to have sex with them in order for healing to be accomplished effectively. These manipulation techniques are also typically used within ‘love magic’ contracts, whereby (usually Amazonian) women are cajoled into having sex with the shaman conducting a love spell on their behalf in the hope of winning their true love interest, and also apprenticeship style relations whereby (usually Western) women are told by their ‘*maestro*’ that sex with them is the most effective way for shamanic knowledge to be transferred. Some women who escape these relationships have described the use of manipulation techniques by perpetrators over time for the purpose of sexual gratification. In one such account, which I edited for publication (Rebekah in *chacrana.net*, April 2019), a woman explained how ayahuasca became a ‘conduit’ for her abuser’s sexual fulfilment:

“The shaman would often give me special attention, frequently showering me with compliments about my power, “specialness,” and visions; behaviour that I have now come to realize, through the emergence of other stories, is commonly used by perpetrators of abuse... He often claimed to “need” me. Initially, he said this in a ceremonial setting, for which I was glad... Ayahuasca became a conduit for his other agenda. Before long his “need” for me in ceremony translated into sexual necessity.”

Some of these encounters are isolated incidents but more typically, they take place over an extended period, usually where women have been coaxed into apprenticeship and business relations with supposed healers.

Within the Iquitos context acts of sexual abuse are quite often considered to be acts of *brujería* (witchcraft/sorcery) involving the use of shamanic techniques for the purpose of manipulation and sexual attack. While it is usual for people to experience a ‘freeze response’

in the event of sexual abuse whereby they feel unable to move and/or defend themselves against their attacker (Sanderson 2013), within the context of ayahuasca-related sexual abuse, it is also considered possible for shamans to manipulate this response from their victims through the use of shamanic powers. Indeed, the inability to move when sexual abuse is taking place was a common theme within reports of sexual abuse within my research that was often associated with shamanic agency. While these might be considered alternative interpretations of the same event, contrary to this argument is the claim that was present in my research that perpetrator shamans may also “paralyse” other ceremonial participants whilst they sexually abuse an individual. From this vantage point perpetrator shamans emerge as aggressor predators whereas if considered as a ‘freeze response’, some perpetrators might argue they interpreted a lack of resistance as consent. This could be deemed as understandable within the local cultural context in which women are usually more submissive and the issue of consent has not received the attention it has in Western countries and is not usually expected to be vocal, and in which codes of conduct around shaman-patient relations are not clearly defined.

Another possibility within the context of ayahuasca shamanism is spiritual rape, a phenomenon also reported by Evengia Fotiou (Fotiou 2010:214-5) whereby *ayahuasqueros* call the spirits of participants who are *mareados* (drunk) to them and abuse them spiritually. This kind of abuse was observed many times by *mestizo ayahuasquera* La Doctora in ayahuasca ceremonies. While the abused do not feel anything, the attacker enjoys it (“*la persona no siente pero ellos le disfruta*”), she said. These spiritual attacks are usually enacted when participants are almost unconscious, often having been given too much ayahuasca intentionally by the perpetrator, and can occur unbeknownst to the abused. Although the abused do not usually feel anything in the event of this kind of abuse, it affects them

negatively being “*something dirty*”, which, according to La Doctora, has the effect of making them become “*closed and unable to find love or work*”.

The local female *ayahuasqueras* I interviewed all raised the issue of sexual harassment and abuse within their profession and have suggested that this problem is one reason why there are fewer female practitioners than male. For many women, experiences of abuse or the threat of abuse acts as a deterrent against participating in the male dominated practice of ayahuasca shamanism. Indeed, sexual abuse of female apprentices may be seen as the result of trying to succeed in a male dominated domain. A Shipibo *Maestra* explained in an interview that in her home community in the region of Pucallpa female *curanderas* work together and treat female patients because:

“between women, there is more trust in the work, but men and women very little...some, no, almost do not give confidence to men, but women like me, with you and me, yes or no? speaking, as between women.”

She clarified that this was partly because often “*men want sexual things.*”. Indeed, male dominated ayahuasca retreat settings which foreign women often attend alone without female relatives or friends to accompany them, are unusual according to local norms (Peluso 2014).

La Doctora was motivated to become an *ayahuasquera* and *espiritista* largely to help women:

“because for that I am sent, for healing, salvation, and justice for women who are mistreated, who are raped, who are marginalized, who are abused, for all that kind of thing I am sent.”

She experienced sexual abuse at the hands of a group of male *ayahuasqueros* with whom she previously apprenticed and worked. In an interview she recalled with horror how she witnessed this group of “*maestros*” serially sexual abusing their female patients in ayahuasca ceremonies. One night they had also attempted to rape her,

positioning her in the centre of the room and attempting to paralyse her first through shamanic techniques. Having received warnings about their mal - intentions through her spirit guides, she said, she was able to protect herself against sexual abuse in this instance. Following her attempted rape, she terminated her work with this group of *ayahuasqueros* and worked predominantly alone in the treatment of women before starting work in a touristic centre. This meant working alongside male *ayahuasqueros* once again, who she discovered were also sexually abusive towards their patients: “*The maestros there do the same*”. The growth of tourism she argues, has attracted “*many false shamans who are simply abusers*”. La Doctora emphasised that sexual abuse of patients and ceremonial participants happens in local contexts as well as touristic contexts but that it is mostly Western women who are affected, “*leaving them emotionally stranded in a foreign country, with no clear legal recourse*”.

From Local to Touristic Contexts: the growth of the sexual abuse problem

As La Doctora attests, sexual abuse of women in ayahuasca communities is a problem in local as well as Westernized contexts. However, the growth of the global ayahuasca industry with Iquitos as its hub has created conditions in which sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism has been able to grow. In this section I will explore why.

When I first arrived in Iquitos in 2014 and began partaking in ayahuasca ceremonies I was completely unaware of the potential dangers of sexual abuse in such settings. Yet within the first couple of months of being there I had experienced sexual advances from two ‘healers’ (one local *ayahuasquero*, one American energy healer) during healing practices. I blamed my own naivety for these occurrences at the time and assumed they were rare and isolated incidences. However, it gradually became apparent that sexual

abuse of women partaking in ayahuasca shamanism in the vicinity, and beyond, was quite commonplace.

I was first told that shaman/participant sexual abuse was a problem by a middle- aged Canadian woman who I met at the centre where I initially volunteered (featured in the opening *vignette* of this dissertation). She had long-term experience drinking ayahuasca with several different *ayahuasqueros* across different regions of Peru and had recently left a centre where she had been staying for some time because the *ayahuasquero* there had told her that she must have sex with him if she wanted to progress. This was only the most recent disappointment she had experienced with a potential healer and teacher, having been on the receiving end of inappropriate sexual advances from others before him.

With my eyes now more open, I began to take note of the wider extent to which sexual abuse was a problem and its increasing occurrence in Iquitos. During the following years while the #MeToo movement took hold of global consciousness, I continued to take note of the numerous encounters with sexual abuse my research participants experienced. The following are a few examples that represent the various forms and scenarios in which sexual abuse typically occurs in this setting. They also raise key issues in touristic ayahuasca contexts around cross-cultural understandings of consent and codes of conduct for shaman/facilitator – patient/participant relations, that I will address in the following discussion.

Example 1:

A European woman had travelled to Peru for the purpose of engaging in ayahuasca healing in its native environment for the first time, having partaken in several ayahuasca ceremonies in her home country beforehand. She located ceremonies in a centre through people she met in Iquitos and travelled there with a female companion. The centre and *ayahuasquero* working there were apparently well known in the region. In an interview a year later she recalled feeling “*uncomfortable from the start*” in this setting but, she explained, “*I ignored my instincts because I had come here for this experience and we were now quite far from the city and well, I didn’t know what I was doing*”. She and her female companion were both sexually abused during the ceremony that evening, as she described:

“towards the end of the ceremony the shaman came over to “do our healings” (gestures sarcastically) ... he went over to the other girl first and I felt something was off the way he was touching her ... then he came to me and I froze. As he moved his hands gradually over my body it didn’t feel right but I wasn’t sure until he reached my... (gestures to her genital area)... and didn’t stop. I felt sick and of course you look back and think, ‘how did I let him do that’? but in the moment you know it happens before you know what is happening”.

The women left the next morning and went to the police station in Iquitos immediately to file a complaint against the perpetrator. “*This was not a good idea*”, the woman explained, “*actually it made it worse*” as police officers laughed at the women and suggested that it was their fault for going to the centre alone and for trusting their attacker.

Example 2:

A young English woman was conducting her first plant *dieta* in a retreat centre near to Iquitos. During the *dieta* when there were no other guests present and the shaman’s apprentice was also away from the centre, the shaman visited her to conduct a “healing.” He

told her she needed to be naked for this healing, and so she undressed. *“I didn’t really think anything of it at that point”* she recalled. The shaman proceeded to manoeuvre his hands over her body gesturing occasionally to *“swipe away energy”*. *“It became more and more uncomfortable”* until finally he was touching her intimate parts and then *“unbuttoned his pants and went to pull out his penis”*. It was then that the woman spoke up and stopped him from going any further. In hindsight, she said, *“it seems so stupid now that I let him get that far.”*

Example 3:

An American man’s female friend had been apprenticing with *“el brujo”* as he later referred to the *ayahuasquero*, for a short time - for which she had paid him a large amount of money (apparently over thirty thousand dollars). One night he accompanied her to a ceremony in *“el brujo’s”* house along with several other people. Towards the end of the ceremony, the man said, *“I realised I could not move”*. *“El brujo”* he explained, had *“paralysed”* him and the other ceremonial participants. *“I saw him go for my friend and knew something terrible was going to happen, but I couldn’t do anything about it”*, he recalled. *“El Brujo”* took her to the toilets where he raped her, as she told her friend afterwards. Unable to defend herself, she had been under the influence of similar forces.

Example 4:

A European woman who had an extended stay in Iquitos over several months recalled how she was *“groomed”* by an *ayahuasquero* who made a series of dubious claims and suggestions to coax her into having sex with him. *“He attempted to normalise sex between us”* by first telling her about a previous relationship he had with a female apprentice and explaining that *“his wife didn’t mind what he did with other women”*. *“He began to lie with me at the end of ceremonies and gradually got closer and more*

intimate with me, doing healing work on my body at first until we started having sex sometimes". It was months later that she looked back and "*realised I had been taken advantage of*".

Example 5 (as also addressed in the previous chapter):

A female American apprentice who was suffering from unrequited love and heartache was told by her then *maestro* that he could teach her "*love magic*." When I spoke with her, the apprentice explained that she had recently been released from a "*spell*" he had put her under, the effects of which she described: "*my desire to be with him was overwhelming, it was like an obsession, you can't stop thinking about them and you feel kind of crazy*". Although she was released from the "*spell*" before any sexual abuse took place, under its effects, she became defensive of him when suspected cases of sexual abuse involving local patients became apparent recalling, "*I couldn't see that anything would go wrong even when he was molesting the girls, I thought well that's just expected here*." She also revealed later that he had suggested to her at one point that having sex with him was "*the most direct way to learn*".

Example 6:

An American ayahuasca tourist in her early twenties who had suffered sexual trauma in the past was participating in ayahuasca ceremonies staying with an *ayahuasquero* and his family in a local town downstream from Iquitos. The woman held this man in very high esteem and would praise him frequently in company and elicit his attention. One evening there was a *fiesta* in the town during which she and the *ayahuasquero* both drank quite large amounts of alcohol. According to onlookers he was very drunk and in front of a dance floor full of people pulled the young woman out of the crowd and took her away with him. She later returned to

the family home covered in blood and crying, as women in the household witnessed, trying to console her. It transpired that they had had sex in a field where he had taken her nearby, what she later referred to as a “*drunken fumble*”. The local women who had seen her following the event expressed concern for her welfare and suggested the shaman was at fault. However, they seemed reluctant to say very much about the incident, perhaps due to this *ayahuasquero*’s status in the community and the prevalence of gossip (*chisme*) there. Male members of the local population, including two other *ayahuasqueros*, took a different view. They joked about the incident saying she had had sex with another man in the town also. A couple of men expressed disapproval with the *ayahuasquero* involved but one clarified this by saying, “*if you are going to do something with a girl, you don’t do it where everybody can see*”.

Example 7:

An experienced British male ayahuasca drinker brought an incident to the attention of the Western male organiser of a retreat in which he was working as a facilitator near Iquitos. The local “*curandero*”, he explained, had singled out a female participant for “*special attention*” and begun taking her to his lodgings during the retreat:

“Worried for her safety on account of her history of vulnerability combined with my growing suspicions about the curandero, I approached the retreat organiser and centre owner in order to warn him that I suspected foul play and that some intervention might be required in order to bring all concerned back on track. He was not interested in my concerns and reassured me that he trusted the curandero to do whatever was needed to help the female participant in question to recover from her abuse trauma. I reminded him of professional distancing, conflict of interests, the absolute prohibition of sex during retreats and especially between doctor and patient, that there is a very clear line not to be crossed, and finally that it would be disastrous for his own reputation if abuse was permitted on his watch. He was more interested in brushing it off, not intervening and having a go at me for over-reacting. He even told me that if the curandero believed it would be helpful for the female retreat participant to have sex with him, then he trusted him to know what was necessary and “she probably needs a good shag to brush away the cobwebs, anyway.””

The facilitator left the retreat before it ended feeling “*pushed out*” and disillusioned.

Conflicting Interpretations of Ayahuasca Culture

Between Peruvian *ayahuasqueros* and Western clientele, misinformed cultural stereotypes in touristic settings have greatly contributed to occurrences of sexual abuse. A key problem is the romanticisation of ayahuasca shamanism that is typical of ayahuasca’s Western audience (Fotiou 2010; Labate & Cavnar 2014; Gearin 2016; Mesturini Cappo 2018) that places *ayahuasqueros* on a pedestal. Within mestizo society *ayahuasqueros* are not expected to be morally superior, as the example of the drunk *ayahuasquero* having sex with his Western admirer in example 6 reflects. In fact, being drunk is a common occurrence among local *ayahuasqueros*. Many Western participants have a tendency to assume that Amazonian shamans are spiritual monks or gurus and not normal men. Abstinence rules associated with the ‘ayahuasca diet’ followed by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism (Gearin & Labate 2018) are significant in influencing such perceptions, being included in guidance given to Western participants in organised ceremonies and retreats. Within the mind-set of ayahuasca retreat and ceremonial participants, abstinence seems often to be confused with asceticism.

In this light, Westerners’ misperceptions of *ayahuasqueros* go beyond naïve romanticism but are rather based on the misinterpretation of the little information they have regarding local shamanic practice. For them, these sexual abstinence practices are akin to various types of eastern spirituality influences which predate the popularity of Amazonian shamanism within the popular Western spiritual movement (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). It is no surprise that when the importance of sexual abstinence for engaging in ayahuasca shamanism has been emphasised to Western participants, that

they are shocked and unprepared for the possibility of sexual abuse occurring in such a healing framework.

Having entered ceremonial environments largely ill-informed and ignorant about the potential danger for possible sexual abuse, Western women are furthermore at risk because of how they may be perceived by local people in Amazonian settings. Indeed, the owner of the first ayahuasca centre I visited warned me that Western women are often perceived by Amazonian men as being “*loose*” and sexually available, due partly, he suggested, to cinematic and online references, including presumably, pornography. Transient participants in ayahuasca shamanism are not usually made aware of local perceptions of themselves as Westerners. Yet, retreat settings and formats sometimes involve them engaging in behaviours that might feed these stereotypes. For instance, it is quite common for Western retreat participants in ayahuasca retreats in the Iquitos region to bathe naked or semi-naked in local rivers and to occasionally also participate in group flower or mud baths that may be included as part of ‘retreat’ offerings. It is also important to note that local women do not expose their bodies in a group setting or in front of men. As I discovered in Jenaro Herrera, women usually bathe in communal rivers wearing their clothes, such as shorts and vest tops, in order to keep themselves covered up.

Many Western women travel alone to engage in ayahuasca ceremonies and retreats. Within local Amazonian communities a woman travelling alone is perceived as an oddity at the very least, and much worse, represents a potential target for sexual predators. I remember sitting at the port in Jenaro Herrera one day waiting for a *lancha* to Iquitos and being asked by a young boy who was interested in where I was from and what I was doing in the town, “*Do you not have friends?*” followed by, “*Where is your family?*” For this boy, a lack of familial ties or friends seemed to be the only conceivable reason why I would travel alone away from my

home country and to the other side of the world. This example speaks to the alien-like identity which solo female travellers embody for many local people, an identity which contributes to their vulnerability in such contexts. It is indeed very common for locals in the Iquitos region to question women travelling alone about whether they have a husband or children, and about their seemingly ‘missing’ family. As well as being greeted with innocent curiosity, a woman without family nearby is likely to be perceived as having no protection and can therefore make her appear as being more open to a sexual encounter.

Foreign participants’ desire for a healing experience coupled with their unfamiliarity with local healing practices makes them particularly susceptible to some form of sexual abuse. To complicate matters, the ayahuasca healing experience attracts many women who have experienced sexual abuse in the past and are seeking healing from such trauma; furthermore, research shows that women who have experienced sexual abuse in the past are sadly vulnerable to repeat attacks (Messman & Long 1996).

Victims and survivors of sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts commonly state that they were unaware at first of whether the shaman’s behaviour was ‘normal’ during the event of their abuse, as example 1 reflects. *La Doctora* lamented in an interview: “*they* [female ceremonial participants] *think that what the shamans are doing is normal, no it’s not!*” whilst the shamans think, “*they are not going to ask me why I am doing this, simply I am going to abuse ...they do it like a game*”. In example 2, being alone in this situation with the shaman meant the woman was without anyone else to check his behaviour or support her suspicions of malintent as the encounter unfolded. This example is typical of wider examples. Indeed, it has been a usual practice for women in retreat settings to be left alone with *ayahuasqueros* for supposed healing purposes and predator shamans have taken advantage of this fact and indeed, where possible, orchestrated these scenarios.

Ayahuasca retreats often take place in quite remote jungle locations where support in the event of attack may be unavailable. As the women in the first example experienced, it may also be difficult to obtain help following the attack due to a lack of available support in the vicinity including legal routes due to some local attitudes to sexual abuse as exhibited by these police officers. Despite being one of the first South American countries to legislate against sexual violence against women during the 1990s, impunity for sexual crimes remains high in Peru. This, some research suggests, is because the State is itself a perpetrator of sexual violence against women in that policeman, members of the army and men in political power are implicated as perpetrators, and due to the persistence of the State's patriarchal structure and values that place the importance of the male-headed family unit above women's security, also responsible for the normalization and suppression of sexual violence against women (Boesten 2012). A widespread culture of 'victim blaming' that has laid responsibility for occurrences of sexual abuse on female victims reaches across cultural boundaries (Kalra & Bhugra 2013).

Western women participating in ayahuasca retreats are furthermore a long way from home and potential support avenues and are unable to access the local legal system. It is of course very challenging to bring a case against a sexual abuse perpetrator from the other side of the world. Upon returning home, most choose not to pursue a case against the perpetrator and many do not speak about the abuse at all. Indeed, several women who shared their stories with me said they had not spoken about the incident previously.

Examples 3, 4 and 5 demonstrate how women can be subtly or forcefully manipulated into sexual acts within ayahuasca contexts. Some sexual encounters may be considered 'consensual' at the time of their occurrence but over time or in hindsight, some of these encounters, upon deeper reflection, become understood as being abusive. This is often the case in incidences whereby women have been coaxed into sexual relationships under the

guise of healing and apprenticeship. Quite commonly, perpetrators may claim that sexual encounters with clients and apprentices are acceptable within the healing context, as shown in example 4 where the apprentice was told by her *maestro* that his wife does not mind him having sex with other women, telling her that he previously had a foreign female companion. These examples demonstrate how Western women's lack of familiarity with local ayahuasca culture and practices can put them at greater risk than local women of being manipulated into taking part in sexual acts and abusive relationships.

In addition to usual manipulation techniques, the use of shamanic techniques for the purpose of manipulation and abuse is represented by examples 3 and 5. These techniques are based on local beliefs and may be used, initially at least, unbeknownst to most Western participants and potential targets of sexual abuse, at least in theory. Most transient foreign participants in ayahuasca shamanism are completely unaware of local ideas about the possibility of spiritual rape, for example, and the potential for other forms of spiritual attack or manipulation within shamanic contexts which are believed to lead to physical sexual attack. According to my informants, spiritual rape may occur unbeknownst to the person, having a negative effect on them, as described by La Doctora, but without them knowing the cause of this. While insiders among my research participants in Iquitos often connected sexual abuse cases with acts of *brujería*, most Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism are unaware of the existence of *brujería* or are dismissive of its potential power and influence in this setting. As addressed in the previous chapter however, this usually changes through immersion in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos involving encounters with *brujería*, either personal or through gossip and the cases of companions. In cases I knew of where the cause of sexual abuse or seduction was deemed to be magical, as in example 5 with the "spell", the person who experienced this was immersed in the community and aware of the possibility; in this case the woman was told by a male apprentice and a male friend that they thought she was under a spell, leading her to

interpret her experience this way. While the possibility of someone who ‘doesn’t believe in it’ being affected by a love spell, or indeed *brujería* more widely, is generally accepted by most insiders in the Iquitos community, this possibility is not verifiable. There is also the question of what constitutes locally conventional and acceptable uses of seduction techniques and if any could be considered as such rather than as forms of attack, a boundary which becomes blurred within the realm of Amazonian love magic, a prevalent local practice, which I will address further below.

As examples 6 and 7 demonstrate, it is considered acceptable by some individuals in the ayahuasca community for *ayahuasqueros* to sometimes have sexual relations with female participants in ceremonial and related settings. It is not unheard of for local women to sometimes have sex with shamans following receiving healings from them in a consensual manner. In one case in my research a child had been conceived in this context, with no suggestion it was morally dubious, and in another, a long-term relationship had started this way. It was also suggested by one Western male practitioner in my research that in the past payment for healings from local healers had sometimes been given in the form of sex with women in local communities. His suggestion was that this possibility provided some potential historical basis for current local attitudes, leaving a remanence of expectation amongst some local shamans for sexual favours in return for their services.

The attitude of the men in example 6 shows more concern for tactfulness than integrity with regards to the *ayahuasquero*’s actions, and no concern for the vulnerability of the woman involved. While this seems insensitive and immoral to the Western onlooker, their reactions help us to understand the divergent moralities and relational dynamics that can be involved. So, what might seem to be an obvious transgression of acceptable behaviour to some Western participants, among some *ayahuasqueros* is considered an acceptable form and outcome of sexual dynamics. They do not think that there is a problem with having sex with a Western

female visitor who seemingly has no husband or partner and behaves in ways, intentionally or not, that can be perceived as her idolizing the shaman and local culture, and thus further appearing as a possibly willing sexual partner.

Power Relations and Sexual Abuse

Sexual relations with a participant by *ayahuasqueros* who could otherwise be considered their patient seems an obvious abuse of power to many Westerners. Yet, power dynamics between shaman and patient are greatly complicated in touristic settings. One reason for this is because Western clients come from more economically and educationally privileged backgrounds than shamanic leaders of ceremony. Initialising sexual relations with them may be considered an acceptable upwardly mobile route through which an *ayahuasquero* might gain more status, for instance entering into business as well as sexual and romantic relations with Western women, as has become more common within this industry.

These ‘conquests’ must also be considered within the context of the tensions (political, economic, cultural and racial) that exist across the ayahuasca industry, especially between Amazonian shaman and Western business owners. Sexual access to and relations with female clients might be considered fair compensation by Amazonian shamans for their sharing of knowledge and tradition, a way to benefit from an industry which is largely controlled by Western men. As addressed previously, it is usual for local *ayahuasqueros* working in the ayahuasca industry to complain about being under-paid by Western centre owners who they typically argue profit from their knowledge without compensating them properly (these arguments resoundingly refer to monetary compensation). Alex Gearin has also noted this theme, highlighting the contradictions between the idealistic ‘primitivism’ of Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism and Amazonians’ desires for accumulation and

economic resources manifested in the ways sorcery is used within the ayahuasca industry in the battle for wealth, status and international clients (Gearin 2022).

I argue that women may also be considered as commodities by some actors, fought over by both Amazonian and Western males in the industry. For example, it was suggested by one Western male apprentice that his *maestro* was jealous of his own sexual and romantic relations with some female participants in their ceremonies and retreats and had started sexually harassing women “*because he thought he should be getting some too*”. Indeed, women are in some cases perceived as objects of conquest in this realm of shamanic rivalries and warfare. As discussed in the previous chapter, these rivalries and warfare have been fuelled by the growth of the commercial ayahuasca industry. My research suggests that the increase in sexual attacks on women in these contexts is related to these developments.

Sexual ‘conquest’ in the context of shamanic rivalries can also be understood in relation to predation-seduction techniques of acquiring power (Fausto 2004, 2012). Sexual conquest, like stealing *dietas* from apprentices is a form of power acquisition. Within mestizo shamanism power is typically acquired from outside, most potently from other realms. A Western woman can also be considered in such terms. Sexual conquest of Western women then from this perspective is potentially a potent form of power acquisition, spiritually, and furthermore, in some cases, also in practical, material terms should the object of conquest become a supporter and ally providing access to money and clients.

Sexual relations between *ayahuasqueros* and female participants in ayahuasca shamanism are also considered acceptable by some Western facilitators and organisers of ceremonies and retreats who simply regard this as decisions among adults, or otherwise choose to ignore what would be usual codes of conduct within their home countries around similar relationships, deeming them inapplicable or unwelcome in this context. As the Western male organiser in

example 7 argued, sexual relations between *ayahuasqueros* and female participants may be seen as necessary for healing or at least an unharmed distraction. The transient nature of ayahuasca retreats with foreign participants who return home makes them opportune situations for perpetrators of sexual abuse, many of whom have not been held accountable for their actions by retreat organisers. Yet a key issue underlying the problem of sexual abuse within touristic ayahuasca contexts also represented by this example is the confusion and disagreement that exists within the ayahuasca community over what actually constitutes sexual abuse and what are proper codes of conduct for shaman/patient relations. The ethical codes of conduct for healer / patient relations posited by the facilitator in this example are not considered objectively applicable to this context. Indeed, cross-cultural contradictions exist between different perspectives of sexual relations and morality that conflict and overlap within the realm of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and its practice in touristic settings. I will explore this in the following section by looking at the relationship between sex, love and ayahuasca within mestizo Amazonian society in comparison with Westernised ayahuasca settings.

Sex, Love and Ayahuasca

Most Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism would probably argue that sex and ayahuasca are incompatible and contradictory concepts. As I have mentioned previously, this is largely due to their association of ayahuasca with sexual abstinence due to *dieta* rules. Yet, within mestizo Amazonian culture, the relationship between ayahuasca, sex and love is much more fluid and involved than outside novice perceptions might presume, as the significance of “love magic” (*pusanga*) within Amazonian shamanism represents

As addressed in Chapter Three, sexual prohibitions form a key part of shamanic *dieta* within ayahuasca shamanism and Peruvian *vegetalismo*. Thus, periods of sexual abstinence are a

requirement of shamanic apprenticeship. Sexual abstinence must be practiced during and for a designated period following plant *dietas* whereby following these prohibitions shows dedication to the plant spirit ally with whom one is dieting.

Sexual prohibitions within *dieta* practice are a feature of ayahuasca shamanism that has been emphasised through ayahuasca globalisation and the development of the modern “ayahuasca *dieta*”, a Western interpretation of traditional and diverse *dieta* practices (Gearin & Labate 2018). Generally, Western participants in ayahuasca ceremonies and retreats are instructed to follow strict dietary rules including sexual abstinence for several days at least (usually more) before, during and after an ayahuasca ceremony or retreat. Yet, sexual restrictions are not usually followed by *ayahuasqueros* outside of the context of plant *dietas*. As previously discussed by Daniela Peluso, sexual abstinence is not considered necessary for *ayahuasqueros* past the apprenticeship stage (Peluso 2014).

On the contrary, according to local gossip and the personal boastings of some *ayahuasqueros* themselves, *ayahuasqueros* and other shamans are considered to have heightened sexual libido and virility within *mestizo* Amazonian society, apparently remaining sexually active until old age. Furthermore, ayahuasca and other plant medicines are quite typically utilised locally for improving sexual performance: it is not unusual for shamanic plant *dietas* to be used for the purpose of regaining sexual health, and there are also many plant potions available at local markets said to bestow these benefits.

Within *mestizo* ayahuasca shamanism ayahuasca can be a facilitator of sexual and romantic relationships within human and non-human realms. Indeed, it is not uncommon for *ayahuasqueros* to have romantic and sexual partners in spirit realms. Some *ayahuasqueros* relate to ayahuasca itself (or *herself*) as a romantic spiritual partner, such as an *ayahuasquero* in my research who referred to ayahuasca as his “*novia*” (girlfriend), a statement I did not

take seriously at first but later understood to be more literal than I had initially considered. Within popular Amazonian mythology Dolphins (*bufeos*) are said to transform into attractive men to seduce human women while mermaids (*sirenas*) transform into irresistible women to seduce human males, luring them into their underwater realms. These dolphins and sirens are furthermore depicted as *gringos* within these tales (Barbira-Freedman 2014:138), which sheds some light on Amazonians' perceptions of *gringos* as both seductive and deceitful. Don Luco told me that dolphins have the same spirits as human-beings, an interesting insight that provides some basis for their mating within Amazonian mythology and does not align with Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism (1998), which conceives of *all* beings or souls within Amerindian cosmology as the same but with corporal differences, although his analysis is mainly focused on animals. Don Luco clearly distinguishes between the spirits of trees and the spirits of people. These observations warrant further investigation that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Sexual relations with non-humans are considered a way through which humans may pass between worlds and indeed, be permanently transmuted into non-human worlds. *Sirenas* are usually painted as deceptive as well as seductive beings with malintent in these stories. Yet, shamans apparently enjoy a level of agency in these relations, being able to engage voluntarily in relations with *sirenas* and return to land continuing life as usual. Mestizo *ayahuasquero* and *vegetalista* El Maestro from Jenaro Herrera, for example, has a *sirena* girlfriend. As his granddaughter explained to me one day, she is told to stay away from her grandfather by family members when he is angry because it is at these times he often goes to see his *sirena* girlfriend and the family worry that one day he may decide to stay with her.

A European practitioner in my research divulged that he had many spirit entity girlfriends, which he had acquired through dieting over a several year period and drinking ayahuasca. Some ayahuasqueros may have a "*spiritual wife*" (Peluso 2014: 237). These relationships are

an underexplored aspect of ayahuasca shamanism that deserve greater scholarly attention than can be given here. For this discussion, it is significant to note that within the world of Amazonian shamanism sexuality is not separated from spirituality, as it so often is within ‘Western’ mind-sets, and sexual relations can be enjoyed by *ayahuasqueros* within the spiritual plane. These examples provide wider context for the claim by local practitioners referenced above that spiritual rape of female participants by *ayahuasqueros* within ceremonies is quite common.

Within the local context ayahuasca is also a vehicle through which human love matches can be made and sexual conquests seduced with the use of *pusanga* (love potions). Although not widely recognised at the global level, ayahuasca is often employed for the purpose of ‘love magic’ (“*la ciencia de amor*”) in Amazonian settings whereby *ayahuasqueros* and other shaman assist their patients to attract romantic love interests or reconcile broken relationships, often for a high premium. In the Iquitos region, my research suggests, ayahuasca is used for love magic purposes seemingly as much as it is used within *curanderismo*. Indeed, De Rios estimates that within her research in 1977 with Don Hilde and his patients in Iquitos, about a quarter of his adult patients were women who sought help to heal broken relationships or otherwise harm lost lovers with the use of hex *pusangas* (De Rios & Rumrill 2008:29). As this evidence reflects, love magic is commonly used by women in the Iquitos region. Within my research both men and women used love magic, but women’s usage was considered much more typical. This is in contrast with other available ethnographic examples where love magic is used almost exclusively by men to attract female lovers, providing a culturally acceptable explanation for female sexual desire, which is otherwise sanctioned (Bennet 2003: 153) or considered non-existent or extra-ordinary (Eves 2020: 434). Although women can typically be expected to be subservient to men in Amazonian society in particular settings (Peluso 2014), it is considered acceptable for them

to be sexually active and seductive within mestizo Amazonian society. However, men are viewed as more promiscuous. This is perhaps why magic intervention might be considered more necessary for women to secure a man's devotion.

Love spells are usually referred to by mestizos as "*un amarre*" and are a kind of *pusanga*. *Pusanga* refers to luck magic mostly using plants for the purpose of seduction or affecting one's will or motivation in ways that the maker of the concoction intends (Barbira-Freedman 2010, 2012; Peluso 2003, 2021; Shephard 2016; Padilla 2021). As well as referring to luck in love and the practice of conjoining human love partners, *pusangas* are used in hunting magic to attract prey, and within shamanism to attract spirits, the use of which highlights the connection between seduction and predation in hunting and shamanism within Amazonia (Taylor 1996; Barbira-Freedman 2010; Peluso 2014, 2021; Shephard 2016). Love spells in the form of plant essences or perfumes may be put on the clothing or skin of the target having a seductive or harmful effect (Padilla 2021:89). Within ayahuasca shamanism *amarres* are usually enacted through the use of special songs or enchantments as they are usually referred (*encantadores*), sung to one (or occasionally both) romantic love partners in the context of ayahuasca ceremonies or outside. These spells also often involve the use of a photograph of a romantic partner who the client wishes to attract, which may be buried in the ground by the shaman conducting the *amarre* and are the focus of his/her enchantments (*encantadores*).

The practice of love magic occupies an ambiguous position within the locality of Iquitos, positioned in a 'grey area' between healing and *brujería*. It is widely practiced locally and considered an acceptable form of magic and seduction by many of the local population but is given the status of low level *brujería* by some who consider it to be a form of manipulation which threatens free will. Love magic is generally a covert practice within mestizo Amazonian society, conducted by one potential or abandoned romantic partner. Ethnographic examples from Papua New Guinea describe the outrage felt by women who discover they

have been subjected to the powers of love magic (Leavitt 1991; Smith 2014; Eves 2020). Yet, within mestizo society, its use is not always viewed negatively by those involved.

For example, El Espiritista spoke openly about using love magic to attract and seduce his current partner with whom he has lived happily for many years; several times I witnessed him speak of this magical seduction in her presence, to which she responded with a smile. When questioned about the morality of love magic, he argued that it only works if it is God's will. Western practitioners I spoke to on the subject of love magic said they did not practice it and resoundingly disapproved of it due largely to the belief that its use threatens individual free will. These differences relate to cultural differences around perceptions of sexual abuse between mestizos and Westerners. Within the mestizo context an element of meddling in human affairs and affecting another's perception and behaviour through magical 'seduction' techniques is widely considered morally acceptable, with human action positioned as inferior to or as being at the mercy of God's will, or put another way, with ultimate responsibility considered as being in God's hands; whereas according to typical Western views, an individual's freedom to act and to choose is considered paramount, and ultimate responsibility associated with human agency, thus rendering actions that affect another's agency unacceptable.

According to some of my research participants, sexual abuse of female clientele within the context of love magic practices is apparently quite common. As already mentioned, shamans may take advantage of love magic contracts in order to have sex with vulnerable clientele by suggesting that sex with them is necessary for the spell to be effective. Mestizo *ayahuasquera*, La Doctora, lamented on this issue, "*simply to abuse them, they get them naked, they take advantage of their desperation, the suffering of these women*". In these instances, female clientele may be persuaded to have sex with the shaman enacting the love spell in the interest of winning the lover they truly desire. Yet, also, love magic may

apparently be used on ceremonial participants unknowingly. This phenomenon was attributed to abuse cases of Western participants by several experienced insiders among my research participants. In these instances, *amarres* are used by shamans as a means of coercing ceremonial participants into having sex with them. It is arguable that love spells would not be effective on someone who did not believe in them. Insider opinions usually contend with this position, but it is impossible to draw conclusions about this point, as interpretations of sexual abuse cases along these lines only come from those with knowledge of love magic and *brujería*, as we saw in example 5. Those targeted by these “*spells*” are typically overcome by feelings of attraction towards the shaman, which also have the effect of making them “*feel kind of crazy*”, as the research participant from example 5 described. These sentiments are echoed in other ethnographic accounts of the use of love magic where the effects have been likened to madness (Lepowsky 1998: 133; Wardlow 2006; Eves 2020: 436).

The existence and popularity of love magic practices within mestizo Amazonia shows that seduction through the use of ayahuasca and shamanic techniques is a local concept that is often considered to be an acceptable form of seduction. Furthermore, the act of a shaman manipulating a female ceremonial participant into having sex may also be an exercise in control and egotism demonstrative of personal power, to oneself and perhaps one’s peers. Battles for power and status are indeed at the core of relations between *ayahuasqueros* in the ayahuasca industry and beyond. The practice of love magic also further complicates boundaries within healer/patient relations that may otherwise appear to many Western participants as clear cut and adds a new perceived dimension to a consideration of conceivably consensual sexual encounters between healer and patient in ayahuasca contexts.

Thus far, I have argued that Western participants’ lack of awareness of local culture and practices coupled with their romantic misconceptions, make them easy targets for perpetrators of sexual abuse. The informal nature of the ayahuasca industry means there are

no formal codes of conduct or overriding governing bodies to enforce them as we find in the medical profession. This makes bringing perpetrators to justice or stopping them from working in the field quite difficult. There has been little if any protection for vulnerable women in touristic ayahuasca contexts and those who have been attacked often feel unable to come forward and speak up about it. This is usual for victims and survivors of sexual abuse due to feelings of shame (Weiss 2010; Hlavka 2017). Some victims and survivors in ayahuasca contexts have been shamed into feeling responsible by outside parties, whilst others may feel embarrassed about their own 'naivety', a common sentiment among my research participants which perpetrators have been able to take advantage of in touristic ayahuasca contexts. Some women also feel confused about their level of responsibility within abusive interactions and indeed, about whether abuse has actually taken place.

False expectations of shamans fuelled by romanticism coupled with clashes between local moralities and practice and Western moralities associated with ethical codes in the medical profession have created conditions in which the potential for abuse is high and at the same time there is confusion and disagreement within the field of ayahuasca shamanism over what constitutes sexual abuse. Much responsibility surely lies with the foreigners who mediate encounters between Western participants and local *ayahuasqueros* to make participants aware of the incongruencies between Western perceptions of ayahuasca shamanism and shamans, and local culture and practice, and to mediate these encounters. Yet, many actors within the ayahuasca industry have been more concerned with 'selling' the romanticised version of ayahuasca shamanism and shamans typically imagined by Western spiritual seekers, than with protecting them against sexual and other kinds of abuse that might occur (such as psychological, financial and spiritual). Against a back-drop of confusion and mixed interests, speaking out against sexual misconduct within ayahuasca healing spaces has often been met

with resistance. This has started to change within the climate of the #MeToo movement in recent years.

Within this context, anthropologist activist scholars have argued that anthropological methodologies whereby individuals are encouraged to enter unfamiliar social environments alone and expect to suffer as part of their anthropological initiation, puts female researchers at risk of sexual violence (King et. al. 2020). I would argue, for reasons outlined previously, that female novice ayahuasca seekers have found themselves in a similar position. As reports of sexual abuse at the hands of *ayahuasqueros* and religious leaders began to surface across global ayahuasca contexts during my research fieldwork (Peluso 2014; Méndez 2015; Fernández 2018; Sánchez Sarmiento 2018; Benedito & Böschmeier 2019), I became involved in a community initiative by the *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Medicines* to create a set of guidelines which outline typical scenarios in which sexual abuse takes place in ayahuasca contexts and provide advice for the protection of potential participants in ayahuasca ceremonies and related healing contexts (Chacruna 2019).

The Chacruna Guidelines

As a member of the *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines* 'Ayahuasca Community Committee' I led the initiative to produce the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* (Chacruna 2019); the work began in early 2018. This set of guidelines for current and potential ayahuasca ceremonial participants was produced through a collaborative process with other anthropologists of ayahuasca



Figure 15: Sharing the 'Guidelines with IPeru Tourist Information Service, Iquitos.

shamanism, as well as sexual abuse experts, ayahuasca community practitioners and participants including victims and survivors of sexual abuse in these settings, and other colleagues across the psychedelic science community. Communication was primarily conducted via email, with some longer conversations over the phone or via Zoom, and some face-to-face conversations, when possible, between the primary writers and other contributors at conferences for example, when possible. The *'Guidelines'* were written by me, Daniela Peluso and Bia Labate, and edited in communication with others. Based largely on long-term research experience in ayahuasca communities, including my own doctoral fieldwork in the Iquitos region, the guidelines provide advice for participants in ayahuasca shamanism aimed at safeguarding them against abuse as well as raising awareness of the problem of sexual abuse more widely (See Appendix C for full copy of the guidelines). In addition to sharing the *'Guidelines'* with relevant international organisations such as MAPS (Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies) (Sinclair and Labate 2019), I distributed paper copies of the *'Guidelines'* on the ground in subsequent fieldwork periods in Iquitos, sharing them with potential participants in ayahuasca shamanism, tourist 'hot-spots' in the city, tourism and government agencies including the British Embassy in Peru, and ayahuasca retreat centres (Sinclair 2019).

The process of producing the *'Guidelines'* was a difficult one due to the challenges of addressing an issue that spans global contexts, the need to communicate across cultural boundaries, and due to tensions related to this (Peluso, Sinclair, Labate and Cavnar 2020). The very creation of a set of guidelines for potential targets of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings was opposed by a small but vocal group of feminist psychedelic researchers and activists including men as well as women, who considered the project to be a form of "*victim blaming*", laying the responsibility for avoiding sexual attacks solely in the hands of victims. They voiced their objections largely through social media when the *'Guidelines'* were first

published. It was felt by creators of the guidelines that as long as the informal and expansive cross-cultural nature of the ayahuasca industry and the enormity of the general problem of sexual abuse makes stopping perpetrators challenging and the continuation of sexual abuse was increasing, that information sharing aimed at informing and empowering potential targets of sexual abuse and raising community wide awareness seemed a reasonable practical recourse of action towards combatting the problem. References to clothing and behavioural choices within the guidelines and the inferences these choices might have within Amazonian culture were especially criticised. Anthropologists argued that it is partly a lack of cultural awareness enabling informed decision making that has put ceremonial participants at risk, and therefore it was imperative to draw potential participants' attention to this for their safety. Edits were made to improve the presentation of these points for a post #MeToo Western audience.

These debates clearly represented the difficulties of cross-cultural interaction in the context of globalising ayahuasca shamanism, within and upon which 'correct' modes of communication and behaviour cannot be unanimously defined or otherwise imposed by 'outsiders'. This project, like any involving cross-cultural engagement, called for an awareness of cultural relativism. In my view, if we were to uphold the Western feminist and social justice rhetoric, then we would be choosing concern with political correctness over concern for the safety of women in ayahuasca settings.

Chacruna's Ayahuasca Community Committee decided that the guidelines would focus on sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism as evidence showed that women were resoundingly the targets of sexual attacks in ayahuasca settings. Another side of gender-based abuse between Amazonians and Western visitors to the region is that Western men are manipulated into romantic and sexual relationships with local women who prey on them for their money and the social status they might acquire through being with a *gringo*. It is not

unusual to find Western men who have been devastated both financially as well as emotionally by broken relationships with local women in Iquitos, often involving children and their long-term maintenance.

It was also decided that the '*Guidelines*' should take a materialist approach to sexual abuse in line with the views of most of their potential readership, being predominantly from Western countries and we envisaged, unfamiliar with, or inexperienced in ayahuasca practices and cultural belief systems surrounding them including therefore, the existence of *brujería* and seduction techniques. It was also felt that over-emphasis on magical seduction and *brujería* might alienate much of the readership who would not take these possibilities seriously risking their dismissal of the whole document. However, a reference to the use of shamanic practices by some shamans 'to influence participants into feeling attraction towards them, through love magic and other techniques' was included in guideline 15, to acknowledge this possibility, and indeed also be taken seriously by insiders, as proposed by me, having encountered interpretations of sexual abuse of this kind frequently in the field. The '*Guidelines*' were received largely positively across the ayahuasca community, especially by women who had experienced sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts in the past and those who were curious about taking ayahuasca abroad. One woman who had experienced sexual abuse stated in her interview that if she had read the '*Guidelines*' before coming to Iquitos "*it probably would have saved me from the abuse happening*". Within Iquitos, the '*Guidelines*' received a lot of interest from transient participants in ayahuasca shamanism and were welcomed by tourism and government agencies, which led to an invitation to a forum in Lima on sexual abuse connected with a wider Government project to combat sexual abuse in Peru, the formation of which is on-going.

The reception among established people in the ayahuasca community there was more mixed. The ayahuasca community in Iquitos is generally suspicious of 'outsiders' and resistant to

outsider efforts to influence them. Whilst my ‘insider’ status meant I was listened to and had access to key actors, the production of a set of guidelines by an organisation outside the community highlighting the problem of sexual abuse in its midst was not attractive to everyone. Several retreat centres shared the ‘*Guidelines*’ through their websites and social media channels while some centre owners showed interest, but did not publicise as we had hoped, presumably because publicising information about the possibility for sexual abuse was in conflict with their commercial interests, or they were concerned that it could result in scaremongering. Also, even where acknowledgement of the wider problem is present, centres do not wish to inadvertently infer that their staff might be involved in such practices.

There was also some resistance to the *Chacruna Guidelines*’ from some Western males in the Iquitos community on the grounds that the *Guidelines*’ claim that sexual abuse is “*quite prevalent*” in ayahuasca contexts was exaggerated. One man went as far as posting a YouTube video specifically arguing against this claim³⁶. His main contention was that there was no quantitative evidence to support this claim. Of course, as the ‘*Guidelines*’ state, “*exact numbers are difficult to obtain, as most cases never come to light*”. Whilst a couple of men supported his arguments in a Facebook thread below the online post, it was vehemently objected to by other people, predominantly women, one of whom posted, “*I’ve been coming to the Amazon for over a decade for months at a time, and I can assure you there is rampant sexual violation happening in the ayahuasca community..*”³⁷ The YouTube video suggests that the man’s concerns about protecting the reputation of ayahuasca may have interfered with his objectivity on this matter. Some efforts to argue against the prevalence of sexual abuse or ‘cover it up’ are perhaps more sinister.

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIVcVeHXRv8>.

³⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ayahuascaworld/>.

One prominent male actor in the Iquitos community over many years who had previously established a Facebook page purportedly for posting warnings against perpetrators of sexual abuse in the vicinity suggested to me in personal communication that sexual abuse was no longer a problem in Iquitos, saying that there had been no reports of sexual abuse through his page for two years. Apart from the fact that many people are unaware of his Facebook page, might not be on social media or are not comfortable posting such messages, I later learned from an insider that only reports whereby perpetrators have been prosecuted are allowed to be posted on the page. As we have seen the likelihood of perpetrators being brought to justice is very low in the local region and especially within the tourism context in which most victims and survivors return to their home countries shortly after the event of abuse. Thus, the page effectively acts as a protector of perpetrators and a smokescreen for sexual abuse within the ayahuasca industry. The man who established this page also told me that the Ayahuasca Safety Association (ASA) in Iquitos was dealing with any sexual abuse cases that arose there, something I knew was untrue, although they had published rules as guidance for ceremonial facilitators, which included the instruction to “*Never sexually, spiritually, psychologically, or physically harass or abuse a participant*”, and advised against establishing sexual or romantic relationships with ceremonial and retreat participants during and for at least three months following, as referenced in the introduction to this dissertation. While some centres have incorporated these rules and do enforce them for their facilitators, full enforcement of such rules is clearly difficult and perhaps unrealistic. Enforcement of such rules is also complicated by the complexities of human relationships and the fact that some non-abusive romantic and sexual relationships may be and are indeed established between participants and facilitators and/or shamans in ayahuasca contexts.

Several men and women, including indigenous female informants on the ‘*Guidelines*’ project, felt that attention needed to be given to the fact that some women seek out relationships with

shamans. This can cause problems in local communities. This phenomenon is mentioned in the *Guidelines*’ as is the possibility of forming meaningful romantic and sexual relationships through engagement in ayahuasca shamanism. It is quite usual for transient participants in ayahuasca shamanism to enter willingly into relationships with *ayahuasqueros* and ceremonial facilitators during or following their ceremonial experience. Some women speak positively about sexual encounters with shamans and report feeling empowered through these relationships (Peluso 2014). Whilst this is not condemned, the *Guidelines*’ warn against entering into these relationships within ceremonial and retreat contexts as one’s judgements might be influenced by the effects of ayahuasca and these encounters may also act as a distraction from personal healing work.

While the *Guidelines*’ were of course mainly concerned with the welfare of potential targets for sexual abuse, *ayahuasqueros* and facilitators may also find themselves in difficult positions in their interactions with retreat participants who want to initiate relationships with them and may experience problems because of this. Of relevance here is the projection of feelings that can occur quite typically between patient and therapist known as transference and countertransference in medical and therapeutic settings (Guttman 1984; Gabbard 1995; Lijtmaer 2004). This issue is commonly experienced by both male and female practitioners and facilitators in the ayahuasca industry (Peluso 2014), especially their becoming the object of retreat participants’ projections and sexual/romantic desires. Many retreat participants share feelings they may never have expressed before with ayahuasca retreat facilitators as they go through intense healing experiences. It is no surprise then that they may develop feelings for the person guiding them through this process.

Whilst it is widely accepted that sexual relationships between doctors or therapists and patients are inappropriate as uneven power dynamics place doctors and therapists in the position of responsibility, there are no established professional codes of practice for the

ayahuasca industry. Many facilitators act responsibly by not entering into relationships with retreat participants, perhaps helping them to understand these feelings. However, they may still experience problems. Some people who felt rejected have later complained to retreat centres and organisers that facilitators acted inappropriately in leading them on, and partners and spouses of retreat participants have sometimes been in contact with individuals and centres enraged due to discovering their partner's infatuation with their retreat facilitator after their return home. These incidents are not so uncommon.

Of course, some facilitators and practitioners enter into sexual and/or romantic relations with retreat participants, which appear at least to be consensual at the time. Many *ayahuasqueros* and facilitators have had flings with retreat participants during or more often following ayahuasca retreats. The existence of 'grey areas' around consent and what constitutes abuse was of central concern to my research participants in Iquitos.. A common argument, especially among men within the Iquitos community, is that if both parties involved are consenting adults, there is no problem. However, the giving of consent and rules surrounding consent are only as effective as people's understanding and use of them (Borges, Banyard & Moynihan, 2008). Consent always occurs with specific socio-political contexts so 'mutual consent' requires that both parties can communicate intelligibly with each other and understand each other's behaviour within the social context in which consent is being given (Alexiades & Peluso, 2002). Misunderstandings and miscommunication between participants and practitioners within touristic ayahuasca settings are quite commonplace due to cross-cultural differences in gender dynamics and behavioural norms, confused stereotyping, and the unfamiliarity of ayahuasca practices for most Western participants. Within these contexts, Western practitioners and facilitators may also take advantage of participants' confusion around what constitutes normal practice, or themselves consider familiar codes of conduct inapplicable. As a cultural space inhabited by multiple overlapping moralities, and diverse

actors including many seeking to escape the confines of their ‘culture’, touristic ayahuasca contexts are also conceived of by many Western actors involved as existing and functioning beyond the usual constraints of culturally defined moral, gendered and behavioural codes of conduct.

Since the publication of the ‘*Guidelines*’ the issue of sexual abuse in psychedelic spaces including ceremonies and therapeutic sessions with ketamine and MDMA, for example, has gained further publicity and has become central to debates in the field of psychedelics, for instance prevalent in talks and conversation at conferences like *Breaking Convention*, which I attended in 2023 and published an article on, addressing this theme among others (Sinclair 2023). The problem of creating formal guidelines or rules for what were previously, and traditionally non- regulated spaces is a big issue, due partly to the near impossibility of doing so especially in ayahuasca contexts outside of Western systems, but also due to the aversion of many insiders to this kind of formalisation involving the establishment and influence of some form or forms of governing body.

The value of the ‘*Guidelines*’ in my view is, as they were intended, as an awareness raising and safeguarding document, rather than regulatory, that also inspires conversation around a difficult and important issue, in the interest of moving towards healthier gendered and cross-cultural dynamics in ayahuasca contexts. This will necessarily entail improved understanding of cultural differences and ambiguities of perception around gender dynamics, sex and abuse, which goes beyond the scope of the ‘*Guidelines*’ but which I have attempted to elucidate somewhat in this chapter’s discussion.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered the different ways in which ayahuasca has been used as a vehicle for sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism. I have outlined typical

scenarios in which sexual abuse takes place in ayahuasca contexts in the Iquitos region including molestation during supposed ‘healings’, spiritual and physical rape, through the practice of love magic and *brujería*, and through conceivably ‘consensual’ encounters within the context of love magic contracts and apprenticeship and/or business contracts, or transient ceremonial and retreat settings. While sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism is a problem in local Amazonian contexts, I have discussed how the growth of the ayahuasca industry has created conditions in which the potential for sexual abuse of participants has increased. This is particularly the case in Iquitos which is the hub of international ayahuasca tourism and ayahuasca entrepreneurial efforts.

Conflicts of understanding around gender and behavioural norms in touristic settings have exacerbated the potential for abuse to take place. Cross-cultural stereotyping and misconceptions, including Western romanticism of shamanism and shamans and Amazonians’ exaggerated conceptions of Westerners’ wealth and sexual availability, has also contributed to the problem. While local cultural stereotypes about foreign women may make them seem more sexually available, it is also relevant that they may appear to be easy targets due to their general vulnerability because they are in unfamiliar territory. This is especially true for sole female participants in ayahuasca retreats.

Visitors to Iquitos who are unfamiliar with the particulars of ayahuasca healing practices are particularly susceptible to sexual abuse in ceremonial and related contexts. My initial ‘naivety’ as an ayahuasca novice about the possibility of sexual abuse occurring in ayahuasca healing settings was typical of Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism. Indeed, while it is local public knowledge that sexual abuse can take place usually in the form of molestation during healing sessions, almost all the Western women I spoke with during my research about their experiences with sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings had not even considered the possibility of sexual abuse before entering an ayahuasca retreat or ceremony. At the same

time, my research with experienced female participants in ayahuasca communities and activists on this issue suggests that the problem of sexual abuse has been known about for many years within ayahuasca communities. Due to rising awareness in ayahuasca communities and more publicly since the period my research took place, novice ayahuasca drinkers are now much more likely to know that sexual abuse happens in ayahuasca contexts and may take precautions such as partaking in ceremonies with experienced companions or attending women only settings, which are becoming more common and popular. However, the Iquitos ayahuasca industry remains male dominated and sexual abuse of female participants is still a problem.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the commercial and patriarchal tendencies and organisation of the ayahuasca industry have contributed to creating conditions in which predators have been able to sexually abuse women with few restrictions. A lack of accountability for perpetrators has existed for many years in these largely informal settings in which the problem of sexual abuse has seemingly been suppressed by many insiders.

I have also argued that within patriarchal social systems including mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, not only are ideas about sexual abuse normalised but some shamans may compete among each other over the conquest or seduction of women and/or desire them for their own upward mobility. This phenomenon, I argue, has increased within the commercialised environment of the ayahuasca industry fraught with cross-cultural tensions.

Yet, the situation is not 'black and white'. As we have seen in this discussion, there are a lot of 'grey areas' around what constitutes sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings. In regards to the cross-cultural communication on issues of sexual seduction and abuse, what is considered usual or acceptable in one setting may not be considered so in another. This applies to gender and behavioural norms as well as ayahuasca based practices. Examples that have been raised

during this discussion include naked or semi-naked bathing during retreats, which seemed irrelevant to western feminists but highly significant to indigenous Amazonian women; the practice of love magic , which may seem an acceptable seduction technique to a local Amazonian shaman but as an attempt to breach an individual's power by a Western participant; and the 'rules' of consent and professional codes of practice, which are presumed by some and unknown by others or not recognised as relevant to ayahuasca shamanism and also have disparate interpretations.

I have also considered how the worldwide #MeToo movement has facilitated greater awareness around gender and power dynamics and abuses taking place within ayahuasca contexts and how this has fuelled greater awareness and the willingness of individuals to speak more openly about abuse. However, as highlighted, there are also issues with conflicting value and belief systems around what constitutes abuse in these settings. There have certainly been clear developments in the direction of making women feel safer and trying to combat sexual abuse within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos in recent years. As addressed, some centres have established rules for their workers disallowing sexual relations with participants in retreats during and for a set amount of time following them. Breaking these rules has resulted in facilitators losing their jobs.

Examples from my research illustrate that local people recognise a need for female healers for female patients, which is closely related to women's safety. Indeed, all local *ayahuasqueras* in my research described the local practice of having female only healing environments whereby *ayahuasqueras* work together and alongside other women in the treatment of female patients. Following the #MeToo movement there has been a significant increase in the number of *ayahuasqueras* working in the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos and beyond. While this development is a positive step towards making women safer in ayahuasca settings, as a mirror of traditional local practice, it also suggests a lack of 'progress' in

actually combatting the occurrence of sexual abuse of female participants in male dominated ayahuasca environments. The practice of having women only environments, like the creation of the guidelines also, is a cautionary and protective measure for women, but still assumes male perpetrators of sexual abuse will continue to attack women in ayahuasca settings where men preside. Indeed, sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism remains a problem that is not yet fully resolved.

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