

# **Earth-Beings, Plant Spirits, Ayahuasca and Equivocations.**



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### **Abstract**

This paper will begin with a brief introduction about ayahuasca, its growing use across the world and its increasing interest as a subject of academic study. The second part of the paper will focus on the most used discourses into which the ayahuasca experience is typically located and argue that most of these discourses still exist within a dualist ontology (Escobar, 2010). It will then examine traditions within Western thought that have attempted to break out of the restrictions of these dualist ontologies.

The third and longest part of the paper will use Marisol De La Cadena's book, *'Earth Spirits: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds'* as a point of departure to examine the ontological status of earth beings and plant spirits and as a frame of reference for and comparison with the author's experience of being apprenticed for five years to a Shipibo Maestro (teacher), working with ayahuasca and other plant spirits.

### **1. Part One.**

#### **Introduction: Origins, Globalization and Uses of Ayahuasca**

In conventional Western terms, ayahuasca is a powerful 'hallucinogen' that has been used by many indigenous peoples in the Amazon since pre-Columbian times (McKenna 1999). The exact date from which ayahuasca use can be traced is disputed. Some anthropologists make the claim that its use originates from 5000 years BC. For example, anthropologists Ana María Llamazares and Carlos Martínez Sarasola (2004) write that the use of ayahuasca:

*"Is so deep-rooted in the native philosophy and mythology that there is no doubt about its great antiquity, as a part of aboriginal life. Archaeological finds in Ecuador show that the indigenous Amazons have been using it for about 5000 years."*

Likewise, anthropologist Jeremy Narby (1998, p. 154) states that ayahuasca *"belongs to the indigenous people of Western Amazonia, who hold the keys to a way of knowing that they have practiced without interruption for at least five thousand years."*

In an excellent, comprehensive on-line article, however, looking at the evidence for the claims that ayahuasca use has a 5000-year history, Stephan Beyer (2012) concludes that:

*"And while it is true that the parenteral ingestion of DMT-containing plants is of considerable antiquity in South America, there is no corresponding archeological or documentary evidence prior to the eighteenth century for the combination of a DMT-containing plant with the ayahuasca vine for oral ingestion."*

For indigenous people, who appear to have no interest in trying to date the original use of ayahuasca in their cultures, apart from demonstrating to tourists that they are part of a millennial tradition (Brabec de Mori, 2014), ayahuasca is an important medicine, not a hallucinogen or drug, that can offer both healing and harm (through witchcraft) and provides contact with normally invisible worlds, including the worlds of plant and animal spirits, the world of the ancestors and the worlds of different universes.

Ayahuasca is traditionally made by a lengthy process of boiling together two plants, though many other plants can also be added to the brew. The two basic plants are the vine, ayahuasca itself, (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the shrub chacruna, (*Psychotria viridis*). The chacruna, like many plants, and even the human brain, contains N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (abbreviated N,N-DMT; also known as *DMT*), which is normally understood to be the principle psychoactive component of the brew.

If DMT is orally consumed alone, an enzyme (monoamine oxidase A) in the stomach quickly breaks it down, thus preventing it reaching the brain and having any psychoactive effect. Western pharmacology has discovered (Dos Santos, 2010), however that, if plants and other substances containing DMT are drunk together with the vine ayahuasca, compounds in the vine collectively known as beta-harmalines (harmine, tetrahydroharmine and harmaline) block the chemical decomposition of the DMT and it is carried to the brain through the bloodstream.

This raises the question for Western investigators as to how the indigenous people learned to mix and cook together these two particular plants, as they do not naturally grow together, and a process of trial and error boiling different combinations of plants together would be impossibly time-consuming given the huge diversity and number of plants existing in the Amazon. The indigenous peoples have a very simple answer to this question, which indicates the profound difference between the indigenous and the Western worldview: *the plants themselves told them*.

Beginning in the 1990's, the use of ayahuasca has grown hugely throughout the world and become a 'diaspora', to use the words of Beatriz Labate et al. (2017) in their recent book, despite the illegality of the ayahuasca brew in most nations as DMT is classified as an illicit drug outside Amazonian countries. An article in the New Yorker (Levy, 2016) about the ayahuasca boom in New York and Silicon Valley cited a researcher at the University of Washington School of medicine saying that at any given night in Manhattan there are around one hundred ayahuasca ceremonies or 'circles' taking place.

Additionally, there are estimated to be at least 100 ayahuasca centers in Iquitos, Peru, alone, now colloquially known as the 'ayahuasca capital' or 'Ayahuasca Disneyland' of the world. This expansion of use, catered for by largely Western-run centers, has ushered in the phenomenon of 'ayahuasca tourism', with all its controversies (Dobkin de Rios and Rumrill, 2008), as increasing numbers of Westerners, in search of healing and spiritual experience

(Fotiou, 2010) come to Peru and other Amazonian countries to experience drinking ayahuasca.

With the spread of ayahuasca around the world, its therapeutic benefits are being increasingly recognized in many fields (Labate & Cavnar, 2014). These include the treatment of a wide range of illnesses, both physical and mental. For example, the highly prestigious scientific journal 'Nature' published a news article (Frood, 2015) about the therapeutic potential of ayahuasca for treating depression. Ayahuasca is additionally being shown to be potentially very effective (Feilding, 2017) in the treatment of addictions and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Other authors have investigated the use of ayahuasca in broader areas of human potential such as creativity (Shanon, 2000) and spiritual development (Trichter, 2006).

Ayahuasca, especially in countries such as Brazil where it is not illegal, has been the subject of serious academic pharmacological and neuroscientific research (Domínguez Clavé et al, 2016). A good comprehensive review by Dennis McKenna et al, written in 2008, can be found of past and current research on ayahuasca and, since then, academic and scientific research has expanded hugely.

As research on ayahuasca becomes legitimized, even in countries where its use is not legal, a growing ayahuasca academic community or industry is forming, composed of psychologists, psychotherapists, anthropologists, pharmacologists, ethno-botanists and neuroscientists, amongst others. There have been two world conferences on ayahuasca, in 2014 in Ibiza, Spain and in 2016 in Rio Branco, Brazil. Ayahuasca, and other plant medicines, are also becoming an increasingly important thread of the biannual MAPS (Multi-disciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies) conference held in San Francisco.

## 2. Part Two

### **i) Making sense of the experience of drinking Ayahuasca: five common discourses.**

Many people, on drinking ayahuasca, experience a profound change in their consciousness, often accompanied by a simultaneous recognition that their normal, everyday consciousness is a tiny part of a much vaster field of consciousness. This echoes the words of Jung, who said, according to his follower Robert Johnson (2009), that: "*Ego consciousness is like a cork bobbing on a vast ocean of unconsciousness.*"

Benny Shanon, a Professor of Psychology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, (2002) astutely comments that, (p. 39): "*Ayahuasca brings us to the boundaries not only of science but also of the entire Western world-view and its philosophies.*" Jeremy Narby makes a similar observation in a podcast (2011) that: "*Drinking ayahuasca is a profound challenge to the Western materialist and rational paradigm.*"

Given this deep unsettling, subverting, dissolving and expanding of normal ways of experiencing the world, the question arises as to how Westerners make sense of their experiences with ayahuasca. These experiences, as already noted, carry Westerners way beyond the boundaries of their usual cultural paradigms. Furthermore, Westerners do not share the language, culture and cosmivision of indigenous peoples, developed over at least centuries, which provide a rich and sophisticated set of resources for people to understand their ayahuasca experiences.

Foucault's idea of discourse (Foucault, 1980) offers an opening into understanding the different ways that individuals and societies make sense of their experiences, create meaning out of them and, in so doing, reproduce relations of power.

For Foucault, discourse refers to:

*"Ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon, 1987, p. 108).*

*"... a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance" (Diamond and Quinby, 1988, p. 185).*

Foucault's body of work, as these quotes show, does much to show the complete entanglement of power and knowledge. Knowledge exists, is produced within, and recreates a system of power relations. This perspective profoundly challenges the notion of 'objectivity', that knowledge can exist independently outside a set of socially and politically structured relationships. The creation of objectivity as the only criterion for valid knowledge lays the foundation for scientific thinking.

Reading through the academic literature and personal accounts of ayahuasca experiences, five main discourses can be detected, which help people, and researchers, make sense of their and others experiences. They are each organized around central themes and are overlapping rather than distinct discourses. Following Foucault, each of these discourses is set within and creates and or recreates a set of power relations.

First, as has been noted in the introduction, there is the scientific discourse, especially proceeding from the disciplines of neuroscience, biochemistry, biomedicine and pharmacology. One of the current leading ideas in current neuroscientific studies of ayahuasca and other psychoactive substances, seen from observing the effect on the brain of drinking ayahuasca using fMRI techniques, is that ayahuasca reduces the effect of what is called the 'default

mode network' (Palhano-Fontes F, Andrade KC, Tofoli LF, Santos AC, Crippa JAS, et al., 2015).

Some neuroscientists (Carhart-Harris RL, Friston KJ, 2010) have hypothesized that the default mode mechanism is the seat of Freud's psychological 'ego'. Without having to buy completely into the idea of the Freudian ego, it does seem that neurological studies are making a good case for showing how ayahuasca decenters ego functioning (Feilding, 2017).

Secondly, there is the psychotherapeutic discourse. It has almost become a cliché in the ayahuasca community that *'one night of taking ayahuasca is equivalent to ten years of therapy'*. The psychotherapeutic discourse stresses the importance of themes such as: the decentering of the ego; expanded awareness; the ability to relive, bear and therefore resolve traumatic experiences without being thrown further into trauma; and the psychological integration of the experiences afterwards. The emphasis here, like in nearly all psychotherapy (Hillman, 1992), tends to be very much on the individual self and individual healing.

Thirdly, there is what can be broadly called a 'New Age' discourse, which majors on spiritual themes. The Merriam Webster dictionary (2017) defines 'New Age' as:

*"An eclectic group of cultural attitudes arising in late 20th century Western society that are adapted from those of a variety of ancient and modern cultures, that emphasize beliefs (as reincarnation, holism, pantheism, and occultism) outside the mainstream, and that advance alternative approaches to spirituality, right living, and health."*

Alongside the New Age discourse go all sorts of practices added to ceremonies, such as the use of crystals, playing musical instruments and singing certain songs, which do not feature in traditional indigenous ceremonies.

Fourthly, there is a socio-political discourse, which emphasizes the liberating effects of ayahuasca and, through its use, being able to see through consensus, socially conditioned reality. A key reference often used here is the film *'The Matrix'*. In this discourse, ayahuasca shows us the ways we are being programmed and manipulated by ruling elites.

These elites can be understood in Marxist terms as the ruling classes and/or governing elites or, in less conventional terms, as other-dimensional beings such as the illuminati or aliens or other entities that have gained possession of people and are guiding their actions. David Icke (2007) is perhaps the person who has most popularized these ideas. These ideas can seem very far-fetched but it's worth remembering that they are not so far from early Gnostic Christian ideas about the archons who were beings from another dimension that had the power to intervene in earthly life and whose purpose was to keep people in ignorance of their spiritual birthright (King, 2005).

The fifth discourse available is the ecological discourse. This is closely related to the spiritual discourse as the basis of each is the interconnection of everything. The spiritual discourse approaches this interconnectivity through notions that we are all one in a non-dualistic dimension whilst the ecological discourse approaches this interconnectedness through ideas from the study of living systems such as systems theory (Capra, 2014), chaotic non-linear systems (Gleick, 1987) and the sciences of complexity (Waldrop, 1992; Lewin, 1992).

My questioning of all these discourses, however, is that they still tend to locate and assimilate the ayahuasca experience within dominant Western paradigms, which remain primarily individualist, rationalist, reductionist and materialist. It might be objected here that the new age discourse offers an alternative to Western materialism. Yet, this discourse is highly individualistic. As Glendinning and Bruce (2006) comment:

*“New Age spirituality would seem to be a strong candidate for the future of religion because its individualistic consumeristic ethos fits well with the spirit of the age.”*

Some of the people working within these discourses are acutely aware of their limitations and contradictions. For example, a recent on-line article entitled ‘*Is Psychiatry ready for the Psychedelic Paradigm*’ (Sloshower, 2017) asks:

*How do we study and utilize a medicine with multiple active ingredients that works in a complex, multidimensional, and idiosyncratic way when modern science is inherently reductionist, looking for single molecules that have specific biological mechanisms of action to explain their therapeutic effects on disease processes that can be seen, known, and measured? How can science account for the interaction between the physical properties of a medicine like ayahuasca and the metaphysical healing components that are complementary to its use, such as music, dieting, praying, and other aspects of shamanism?*

Furthermore, all these discourses tend to create dualisms between nature and culture, subject and object, individual and community, which locate the discourses firmly within the roots of modernity in the philosophy of Descartes and the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ushered in by Bacon, Galileo and Newton (Tarnas, 1991). The division between nature and culture that Western thought typically creates is an important thread that runs through this paper and will be returned to later in discussing the work of Marisol de la Cadena.

## **ii) Alternative perspectives challenging modernity.**

There are, however, resources and traditions within Western cultural thought that are helpful in making sense of experiences with ayahuasca, which help to free those experiences from the straightjacket of the dominant Cartesian-Newtonian cultural paradigm and configure different relationships between nature and culture.

The first of these is the work of the psychologist C.J. Jung. Jung, as his autobiography (1962) and his extraordinary work 'The Red Book' (2009) show, took seriously the images he encountered in his dreams and those of his patients as well as the images and figures that came spontaneously to him at times. He put forward the idea that these images and figures, rather than solely expressing and being a projection of an individual psychological reality, had their own independent existence, and were, therefore, autonomous beings. This pointed the way to a broader area of psychic existence, beyond but connected to the individual, which Jung called the '*collective unconsciousness*'.

The second invaluable set of intellectual resources is the work of James Hillman. Hillman became Director of Studies at the Jung Institute whilst Jung was still alive, but, after Jung's death, broke with the Jung Institute, which was taking Jung's work in a more mainstream direction of ego-psychology, to develop the field of archetypal psychology. For Hillman, following Jung, the image has primacy in the psyche and is the bedrock of psychic activity. Images have their own autonomy and cannot be reduced to single explanations of their meaning without doing violence to them. Images are profoundly related to soul. Hillman has described his work as putting back the soul into psychology (Hillman, 1975a).

In a significant paper called '*Anima Mundi*' (1998), Hillman made the important move of locating soul in, and returning it to, the world. Human beings are not the only possessors of soul. Hillman's genius is that whilst working within the Western high cultural tradition - notably Greek, neo-Platonist and Renaissance writers like Heraclitus, Plato, Plotinus, Dante, Ficino and Vico - he is able to put forward a rigorously argued standpoint, similar to indigenous worldviews, in which all beings in the world are en-souled, not just humans, but animals, plants, insects and objects – even plastic cups and shopping malls.

The following is a beautiful passage (p. 48) taken from Hillman's essay on 'The Thought of the Heart' (1998), which serves as a critique of the five discourses mentioned in the earlier section:

*"Here begins phenomenology: in a world of ensouled phenomena. Phenomena need not be saved by grace or faith or all-embracing theory, or by scientific objectivity or transcendental subjectivity. They are saved by the anima mundi, by their own souls and our simple gasping at this imaginal loveliness. The ahh of wonder, of recognition, or the Japanese shee-e through the teeth. The aesthetic response saves the phenomenon, the phenomenon which is the face of the world."*

The third important area of thought is the work of the French philosopher and Islamic scholar Henri Corbin. Corbin, as well as being an expert in Iranian and Sufi mystical thought, was also the first French translator of Heidegger, and moved in the same intellectual circles as Jung and Hillman. His work, especially his book '*Alone with the Alone*' (1998) - though difficult for people unfamiliar with Islamic Shiite philosophy - represents a comprehensive phenomenology of visionary experience.



Corbin is one of the few Western intellectuals to take seriously the realm of visionary experience. Like Jung and Hillman, and the English romantic poets, he sees the primary activity of the psyche as imagination. He understands visionary experiences as happening through an internal organ of perception which he names the 'creative imagination'. This occurs in an intermediate world between a spiritual world of pure forms and intellectual perceptions and our normal sense perception world, which he calls the 'imaginal world'. He says this is (p.13):

*“the world of Idea-Images, of archetypal figures of subtle substances, of ‘immaterial matter’.....where the spiritual takes body and the body becomes spiritual.....This intermediate world is the realm where the conflict which split the Occident, the conflict between theology and philosophy, between faith and knowledge, between symbol and history, is resolved.”*

I cite these three people here – Jung, Hillman and Corbin – as they are all attempts from within Western cultural perspectives to take the 'other' in its own terms, rather than assimilating the 'other' to Western scientific or therapeutic or spiritual or political or ecological frameworks. They also all radically rethink the relationship between nature and culture by giving primacy to the imagination.

### 3. Part Three

#### i) Post-colonial Perspectives.

The remainder of this paper will take the Peruvian cultural anthropologist, Marisol De La Cadena's, book (2015) *'Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds'* as a point of departure to continue to examine the kinds of sense-making discourses that are available to understand the experience of drinking ayahuasca.

This will be done in two ways. First, in more general, theoretical terms, by looking at how plant spirits, following on from De La Cadena's work on earth-beings, can be made sense of and entered into relationship with: and, secondly, in a more personal and direct way, using terms from her book, reflecting on the difficulties in translation, the necessary equivocations and the partial connectivity between my world and the world of my Shipibo teacher.

Before beginning this, I want to situate the work of De La Cadena, as she herself does, in the legacy of post-colonial studies. She acknowledges a huge debt to the many anthropologists and other thinkers who have worked hard to free anthropology and related disciplines of its colonialist beginnings and assumptions.

Comaroff J. & J., say (1991:15) that:

*“The essence of colonization inheres less in political overrule than in seizing and transforming “others” by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing, and interacting with them on terms not of their choosing..... in assuming the*

*capacity to “represent” them, the active verb itself conflating politics and poetics.”*

One of the many remarkable features of De La Cadena’s book is her rigorous insistence on understanding the experiences of her two key collaborators, Mariano and Nazario Turpo, in their own terms, whilst still deploying the full range of Western academic resources available to her, as well as the shared cultural frames of references she has with her collaborators for being Peruvian, albeit from very different geographical and sociocultural worlds in Peru. She is constantly alive to the difficulties in understanding the stories of the events they tell her, and the written archive she has access to, in the terms of the speakers rather than her own terms, and to the interplay between her ideas and the stories of her collaborators and to the ways in which ethnographical practices and discourses from her academic discipline can invalidate important aspects of their life-worlds.

She uses the work of the Brazilian anthropologist, Viveiros de Castro (2004b) to speak of ‘*controlled equivocations*’ - the inevitable difficulty in translating between very different worlds, even when they appear to have terms in common. Following Viveiros, she says the best that can be done in this situation is to be aware of these equivocations as points of difference and resist the temptation to eliminate them. Later in this paper, I will return to this idea of ‘*equivocation*’ as I have experienced it with my Shipibo teacher.

## **ii) Nature and Culture.**

*“In the oldest religion, everything was alive, not supernaturally but naturally alive. There were only deeper and deeper streams of life, vibrations of life more and more vast. So rocks were alive, but a mountain had a deeper, vaster life than a rock, and it was much harder for man to bring his spirit, or his energy, into contact with the life of the mountain, and so he drew strength from the mountain, as from a great standing well of life, than it was to come into contact with the rock.”* D.H. Lawrence, “New Mexico” (2014)

One of the key unquestioned assumptions, which De La Cadena still observes in the work of many postcolonial thinkers, concerns the relationship between nature and culture. De La Cadena, in common with other contemporary anthropologists (Vivieros de Castro, 1998; Descale. 2013; Kohn, 2013; Escobar 2014) wants to re-think the centuries-long dualism between nature and culture. In particular, this means that agency and ontology are seen as fundamental characteristics of the non-human world. Such a move challenges and goes beyond the founding assumptions of the whole Enlightenment project of modernity.

Latour’s work (1993) is highly significant for De La Cadena in showing the importance this ontological distinction between nature and culture has played in the roots of modernity and European expansionism, and how this distinction has been incorporated into the modern political state.

De La Cadena sees Latour as building on the work of historians of science Shapin and Schaffer (1985) on the philosophical and methodological dispute in the 1660's between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes over Robert Boyle's air-pump experiments. She quotes Latour as saying that they were *"like a pair of Founding Fathers, acting in concert to promote one and the same innovation in political theory: the representation of nonhumans belongs to politics, but politics is not allowed to have any relation to the nonhumans produced and mobilized by science and technology."* (Latour, 1993, 28)

She goes on to say that (De La Cadena, 2015, p. 92): *"This, Latour proposed, inaugurated what he called the "modern constitution": the invention of the ontological distinction between humans and nonhumans, and the practices that allowed for both their mixture and separation. Enabled by (and enabling) the European expansion, the modern constitution was at the heart of the invention of both modern experimental science (and its objects) and the coloniality of modern politics."*

As already noted, the ontological distinction between humans and nonhumans is a central thread of this paper. My earlier argument, to recap it here, is that the five common discourses used by Westerners to make sense of their ayahuasca experiences tend to reinforce the traditional dividing line between nature and culture and subject and object, even when the nature of these experiences point beyond these dualisms. Drinking ayahuasca provides many people with powerfully felt, noetic experiences of the lived realities of nonhuman realms, which have their own ontology and agency – animal and plant spirits, earth beings, angelic and diabolic beings, malevolent entities, spirits of places, the spirits of our ancestors, even other-dimensional worlds of aliens or other strange beings. Drinking ayahuasca indicates that these worlds do not exist in a separate realm apart from what is understood to be everyday, consensus reality but interpenetrate with and effect it. It is this connection between the worlds that both makes healing and witchcraft - in the sense of the capacity to do harm to people - possible.

The great achievement of De La Cadena's book is to take seriously the nonhuman beings she refers to as earth-beings, that are central to the way of Andean life she is exploring through her research, and accept they can play a role in human affairs and politics, as her two principal collaborators insist. I now want to turn to the way that De La Cadena writes about these earth-beings and relate it to my own experiences of plant spirits, encountered through the intermediary of La Madre Ayahuasca.

### **iii) Earth-Beings and Plant Spirits.**

When I first read *'Earth-Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds'* just over six months ago in September 2016, I was struck by two things. The first was the resonance between some of the themes of the book, especially her relationship to her two principal collaborators, and the forms of practice they engaged in with earth-beings, and my own experience over five years working with my Shipibo Maestro (teacher) drinking ayahuasca and dieting different *palos* (plants and trees). In particular, I found the idea of the necessary

equivocation between radically different life worlds useful to understand aspects of my relationship with my Maestro. This will be the theme of the next section of this paper.

The second area that had a great impact on me was the meticulous way that De La Cadena wrote about earth-beings, crediting them with an existence and agency usually denied to them by non-indigenous people and researchers, who typically categorize them as religious or spiritual or cultural beliefs. At its colonialist worst, describing them as beliefs can be portrayed as evidence of the superstitious and pre-modern ways of thinking of indigenous people that they need to be rescued from by a modern education. At its post-modern best, referring to the practices related to earth beings as beliefs can be seen as examples of different cultural worldviews in a multicultural world, in which no one belief has a privileged position. It is to De La Cadena's great credit that she refuses to subsume earth beings under the notion of beliefs.

At the same time, though, on first reading, I was disappointed to find no personal account of her experiences with earth-beings in the book. I wondered if that was because the author did not want to risk ridicule in the academic world and/or if she wanted to assert the existence and agency of earth-beings purely through the force of her thinking and investigative rigor, and not refer to any direct experiential knowledge of them.

For Heron and Reason (1997), experiential knowledge is one of the four ways of knowing, alongside propositional, presentational and practical knowing. They define it as:

*“Experiential knowing means direct encounter, face-to-face meeting: feeling and imaging the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing. It is knowing through participative, empathic resonance with a being, so that as knower I feel both attuned with it and distinct from it. It is also the creative shaping of a world through the transaction of imaging it, perceptually and in other ways. Experiential knowing thus articulates reality through felt resonance with the inner being of what is there, and through perceptually enacting (Varela et al, 1993) its forms of appearing.”*

For whatever reason, I felt that by denying or omitting her own direct lived experience - even though she was developing a powerful critique of the field of knowledge in which history and science hold sway, and in which some forms of knowledge are legitimised whilst others are ruled out - she was, at the same time, supporting a view of validity that rules out direct personal experience and privileges general abstract, theory. This is the way of knowing called propositional knowing by Heron and Reason.

The next time I read the book, in early March 2017, I paid particular attention to the passages in which the author mentions and describes her relationship with 'earth-beings'. This gave me a much more nuanced view of her way of thinking and writing about 'earth-beings'.

To examine these nuances further, in the part of this paper that follows, I want to quote four key passages from the book that I selected which indicate the author's relationship with earth beings. After quoting the passage, a comparison will be made with my experience with ayahuasca and plant spirits.

a) *"I learned to identify radical difference – emerging in front of me through the conversations that made it possible – as that which I "did not get" because it exceeded the depth of my understanding. Take earth-beings, for example: I could acknowledge their being through Mariano and Nazario, but I could not know them the way I know that mountains are rocks."* (p. 63)

She seems to be inferring here that she is not capable at all of knowing earth beings outside the frame of reference of her understanding. This is very different from my knowledge of plant spirits. Possibly the aspect of my experience with ayahuasca when dieting different plants and trees that has most challenged my rational, highly educated mind (that is 'educated' in a conventional Western sense) has been my direct experience of encounter with these plant spirits – experiential knowing using Heron and Reason's typology. At times, this has a noetic quality as described by William James (1902):

*"...states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority."*

These experiences of direct encounter with plant spirits have a quality of undisputable and compelling veracity which makes them profoundly meaningful and *"more real than reality"*. Over time, though, I have also come to see and accept that my experience of plant spirits, which, in my case, generally takes the form of conversations with them, is hugely limited in relation to the experience, knowledge and skill of my Shipibo Maestro. Through his culture, his family lineage, his early life in the jungle away from Western influences, and for the fifty years he has been working with ayahuasca and dieting other plants, he has a much wider and deeper appreciation of the world of plant spirits. Moreover, he, unlike myself at this stage in my training, can enter into relationship with the world of plant spirits to heal people.

b) *"I follow Nazario but only to an extent, because my own relationship with earth beings, albeit mediated by his friendship, is different from his. I do not have the means to access them like he did; I do not know tirakuna [earth-beings], and cannot enact them. Instead I know – and can enact – mountains, rivers, lakes, or lagoons. But I can also acknowledge the complexity of these entities as earth-beings/nature (at once different from each other and the same as each other) that straddle the world of runakuna [human beings] and the world I am familiar with."* (p.167)

Again in this passage, I think the author is acknowledging that her way of knowing earth-beings is limited to propositional knowing and does not include experiential knowing. The phrase *'mediated by his friendship'*, however, is

interesting as it indicates that something of the power of Nazario's knowledge was conveyed to her through his being.

c) *"The difference is that rather than extending historicity to include nonhumans in events, following Mariano's stories, I extend eventfulness to earth-beings – entities whose regimes of reality, and the practices that bring them about, unlike history or science, do not require proof to affirm their actuality. Certainly they cannot persuade us that they exist; nevertheless, our incapacity to be persuaded of their participation in making Mariano's archive does not authorise the denial of their being."* (p.150)

The intriguing phrase here for me is that *"certainly they cannot persuade us that they exist"*. That actually runs counter to my experience of plant spirits. I don't think they have any interest in persuading me that they exist but they have revealed themselves to me in a way that has been utterly convincing or persuasive. It could be though that De La Cadena is referring to the idea of persuasiveness within the epistemic regime of science and history, which as she points out, is different from the reality regime of earth beings.

d) *"I knew that Nazario was always careful in his relationship with Ausangate and other earth-beings. He never pretended to do what he could not do, and he did not lie. I do not think Ausangate killed Nazario, because I think Ausangate liked him – however, this does not mean I know Ausangate, not even with my head as Benito did."* (p.19)

This is one of the most interesting passages in the book. The phrase *"because I think Ausangate liked him"* is the closest in the whole book that the author gets to personalising her own relationship with the earth-being that is Ausangate. Yet she is quick to add that *"this does not mean I know Ausangate"*, although she is clearly expressing a view about the likes and dislikes of this being.

Overall, it is clear that De La Cadena treats the practices of her two collaborators, in which they offer *'despachos'* or *'ofrendas'* (best translated as 'offerings') to different earth-beings as a way of asking them to participate favorably in human affairs, with great respect. Although she does not say it explicitly, this respect is extended to the earth-beings to whom these offerings are directed. One way of showing this respect is not to talk loosely or reveal too much to an indiscriminate public audience, such as the people reading a book, about one's knowledge of and relationship with the nonhuman world. This is a feature of esoteric knowledge, which runs counter to the academic tradition, where knowledge has to be made explicit so it can be verified.

Part, therefore, of my more nuanced reading of De La Cadena's relationship with earth beings is the speculation that she may deliberately be choosing not to talk of her direct experience of them. This might be because her relationship to earth beings, which, like all reciprocally-based relationships, carries obligations, involves the requirement to not speak indiscriminately and carelessly about them. Stephan Beyer (2011) also refers to the obligations assumed in relationship with the plant spirit world and that it is not possible to be a 'tourist' or voyeur in this world – genuine reciprocity is demanded. I

hypothesize about this possible reticence on the part of De La Cadena to speak directly of her experiences with earth-beings, too, as a result of my own learning, where it was made clear to me that conversations that I had engaged in with plant spirits were not for public consumption on the internet and that doing this curtails the relationship.

#### **iv) Ecologies of Practice: Naming, Uttering and Singing.**

To further illustrate the existence of earth spirits, De La Cadena describes the condition of being in-ayllu, which is of utmost significance to the two protagonists of her stories. This concept of being in-ayllu is difficult for the individualist Western mind to fully grasp. It suggests that all beings in a given locality, both human and nonhuman, are related and that, more crucially, it is *only through these inter-relationships* that individual entities such as persons or earth-beings can arise. As De La Cadena says of the relationships between human and earth beings (p. 207) in writing about the colonial attempt to eradicate what were seen as idolatries:

*“It would have also involved transforming the relational mode of the in-allyu world, where earth-beings are not objects of human subjects. Rather, they are together and as such are place. The form of the relationship in-ayllu is different from relations of worship or veneration that require separation between humans and sacred mountains or spirits.”*

The part, the individual, is not separate from, or a priori to, but embedded in the whole. Likewise the whole, the ayllu, is enfolded in each part. In the language of chaos theory, each part is a fractal of the whole, and the whole comes into being through its expression in the parts. It does not exist as a transcendent entity.

Cadena quotes a bilingual Quechua-Spanish teacher explaining the term ayllu to her as follows (p. 44):

*“Ayllu is like a weaving, and all the beings in this world – people, animals, mountains, plants etc. – are like the threads, we are part of the design. The beings in this world are not alone, just as by itself a thread is not a weaving, and as weavings are with threads, a runa [person] is always in-ayllu with other beings.”*

The condition of being in-ayllu carries obligations with it. Throughout the book, it is constantly emphasised that when Mariano, one of the two protagonists, is asked by the ayllu to take on political leadership in the struggle against the hacienda system, this cannot be refused because he is obliged to do so by being in-ayllu, even though doing this entails great personal risk and is met with fierce opposition from his wife.

De La Cadena, furthermore, shows that the practice of relating to earth-beings is difficult for the Western mind to grasp. The most powerful earth-beings are the mountains surrounding the area where the protagonists live and the most powerful of these is Ausangate. The point for Mariano and Nazario is that there

is no difference between the name of the mountain and the mountain. In the language of semiotics, there is no separation between signifier and signified. Both the name and the mountain are the earth being. De La Cadena writes: "*In this specific case, things (mountains, soil, water and rocks) are not only things; they are earth beings, and their names speak what they are. Ausangate is its name; they do not have names [just] for the sake of it.....I was told.*" (p.116):

The earth being is invoked and therefore entered into relationship with by uttering its name. But, as another one of Mariano's sons points out, this is not just a matter of knowing the right words to say, of reading the right script. The person making the *despacho* needs a special quality, difficult to describe, but recognised in practice as one who knows.

All this is a very different practice, known in the Western tradition as magic, (and now resurfacing in films and popular literature), where uttering the words invokes the manifestation of those words. A more sophisticated example of this resurgence in interest in magic from literature, apart from the obvious examples of the Harry Potter books and films and the 'Game of Thrones' TV Series, is the first of the trilogy of stories called 'The Name of the Wind' by Patrick Rothfuss (2007). This details the schooling of a young man who later became a legendary magician, where the most powerful, idiosyncratic, unruly and feared teacher in the school is the one who knows the true names of things. By speaking these names they can be invoked. Again there is no distinction between signifier and signified. For that reason, in many indigenous traditions, words have to be used carefully and eloquently. Prechtel (1999) documents this well when he describes his own immersion into Mayan culture on the shores of lake Atitlan in Guatemala.

James Hillman (1975) makes the same point when he says: "*Words too burn and become flesh as we speak*". To quote him further at length, from "*Revisioning Psychology*" (1975):

*"We need to recall the angel aspect of the word, recognizing words as independent carriers of soul between people. We need to recall that we do not just make words up or learn them at school, or ever have them fully under control. Words, like angels, are powers which have invisible power over us. They are personal presences which have whole mythologies: genders, genealogies, (etymologies concerning origins and creations), histories, and vogues; and their own guarding, blaspheming, creating and annihilating effects. For words are persons."*

To bring this discussion into the context of my five years of apprenticeship with my maestro, I experience this non-separation between the words and what they invoke in relation to the healing songs, called *icaros*, that he sings in ayahuasca ceremonies. He is not singing a pre-prepared song script, as most Westerners typically assume and I used to think. If it is just a song, it can be learned and sung as a song but this is not what my Maestro is doing. (It could be, though, that learning the *icaros* as songs is a necessary first step to becoming an adept.) What the earth-beings and plant spirits have in common is that they are



spoken or sung into being for humans to be able to enter in relationship to them.

My Maestro is singing to what he sees in the visions of his *mareación* - the name in Spanish for the state attained after drinking ayahuasca. Moreover, it would not be correct to say that it is just him who is singing. The meaning of the words and the grammatical constructions in the *icaros* take a different form from their use in everyday language. I am deeply indebted to my Shipibo language teacher and linguistic expert, Profesor Eli Sanchez for him pointing this out to me and for his translations of the *icaros* and interpretations of the way that words are being used differently in them.

One key word that is different is the word for 'I'. It is not the narrow egoic 'I', as it is used in ordinary everyday language, but a much vaster presence that links the 'I' of the singer with the authority and knowledge gained through dieting plants. The spirits of the plants that my Maestro has dieted are singing through him. He is a conduit for the plant spirits at the same time that the plant spirits are a channel for him. In the same way as De La Cadena writes about the relationship between her protagonists and their highly skilled practices of entering into relationship with earth-beings, the subject/object distinction collapses. In the case of my Maestro, the *icaro* (the song), the plant spirit and himself are reconfigured through drinking ayahuasca in such a way as, De La Cadena would say, following Haraway (1991), that "*one is too few but two are two many*". This indicates that my Maestro is not solely one person singing but neither is he multiple persons, as this would imply that this multiplicity exists as separate units, whereas all the different forms of being, his human being and the being of the plant spirits, are mutually entangled. For the Western mind, trained in separation and analysis, this is indeed a puzzle.

It is this condition of mutual entanglement, which again, following De La Cadena, following Strathern (2004), we could describe as a series of "partial connections" between the human world of my maestro and the nonhuman world of the plant spirits, that enables him to heal people. It is important to understand the notion of partial connections here not as implying anything to do with the strength of the connection, which in the case of my Maestro is powerful and fully present, but more as De La Cadena writes (p.32) offering "*the possibility of conceptualizing entities (or collectives) with relations integrally implied, thus disrupting them as units.*"

#### **v) Equivocations.**

In this last section of the third part of the paper, I want to address what De La Cadena calls, following Viveiros de Castro (2004b) equivocations. For Viveiros de Castro these necessarily arise from the attempt to understand and translate terms from different lifeworlds.

Since its beginning as a discipline, anthropology has tended to represent the subjects of its study in its own terms, usually racially-laden with assumptions about superiority and inferiority that recreate the power relationships of colonization.

As Comaroff J. & J. say (1991, p. 4): “*Whether it be in the name of a “benign,” civilizing imperialism or in a cynical pursuit of their labor power, the final objective of generations of colonizers has been to colonize [the native’s] consciousness with the axioms and aesthetics of an alien culture.*”

Vivieros de Castro, in common with a new generation of anthropologists influenced by postcolonial studies, is wrestling with the attempt to understand the cosmovisions of Amerindian peoples, which are so different from those of the anthropologists engaged in studying them, without imposing the terms of their own cultural paradigms upon them, and without eliminating the differences that exist between radically different ways of understanding and engaging with the world.

Viveiros de Castro understands anthropology as translation. His view of translation, and therefore equivocation, is worth quoting at length:

*“To translate is to situate oneself in the space of the equivocation and to dwell there. It is not to unmake the equivocation (since this would be to suppose it never existed in the first place) but precisely the opposite is true. To translate is to emphasize or potentialize the equivocation, that is, to open and widen the space imagined not to exist between the conceptual languages in contact, a space that the equivocation precisely concealed. The equivocation is not that which impedes the relation, but that which founds and impels it: a difference in perspective. To translate is to presume that an equivocation always exists; it is to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocity—the essential similarity—between what the Other and We are saying.”* (2004b, p. 10):

I want to further explore this notion of equivocation as I have encountered it in my relation with my Shipibo Maestro. To clarify this term: the word Maestro or Maestra is used as a form of respect to acknowledge Shipibo people, who can be called in Spanish either *médicos* (doctors) or *curanderos* (healers), that have attained a high level of skill, knowledge and healing ability. In Shipibo, they are called *onanya*, translated as one who has knowledge. This ability and subsequent recognition is acquired over many years, usually under the supervision of and in apprenticeship with a trusted Maestro or Maestra, often from the same family, (that leads to the creation of family lineages), through the practice of plant *dietas*.

My Maestro commented, when I interviewed him for a research report I co-wrote (2016) about how Shipibo Maestr@s learn their craft:

*“It takes a long time to become a Maestro. It is an education. It is like any young person going to school. First preschool, then elementary, then high school, then university. It is the same for shamanism in order to become a Maestro. But now, there are people who drink ayahuasca for one or two years, then they think they are a ‘Maestro’. They teach: they run dietas. To be a proper Maestro you have to diet for a long time, years and years. That’s what it takes to learn shamanism, in order to be able to learn to heal.”*

Plant *dietas* are essentially a practice that combines the drinking of ayahuasca with the imbibing of one or more plants over an extended period – anything from ten days to one year – alongside strong dietary and behavioral restrictions. Through the *dieta*, the person is able to receive the teachings, healing capacities and *icaros* (songs) of the spirits of the plants. Ayahuasca functions as an interspecies communicator to help bridge the human world and the world of the plant spirits. Traditionally, these *dietas* were carried out alone, isolated in the jungle, apart from regular visits by the supervising Maestr@.

I first asked my Maestro to become my teacher/Maestro, which implied entering a period of apprenticeship with him, in the fall of 2012. I told him then that I did not imagine myself becoming a healer but I wanted to learn from him in order to do my work better. This work is co-leading a nonprofit called Alianza Arkana, which is a grassroots alliance regenerating the Peruvian Amazon by supporting its indigenous people and their traditions. I was one of the three co-founders of this organization in January 2011 and continue to work with it today as Director of Organizational Development and Research.

My Maestro, in general, is a man of few words. He rarely likes to engage in small-talk although he is always courteous and always asks me about my family, especially my younger son who has worked with him. He rarely engages in explanations, or even dialogue, about what has happened to people in ceremonies and prefers to let his outstanding work as a healer talk for him. He has a powerful, commanding presence in ceremonies yet outside ceremonies is very humble, taciturn and occasionally grumpy. Often, I find him impenetrable.

He was born in 1950 in a small village called Juancito, which is almost the last Shipibo settlement in the lower Ucayali, downriver from Contamana. Hearing him talk about his life growing up there, is to enter a world that sadly no longer exists. There was an abundance of animal life, the rivers and creeks were full of fish, the water was uncontaminated and drinkable, there was very little contact with Westerners, and his family had a deep communion with the forest and extensive knowledge of its medicinal plants.

He was the last of five brothers – all of whom became skilled *médicos* - and an older sister. His sister, who was the first-born of the six children, and his oldest brother are now dead. His two grandfathers were both *merayas*, which is the highest level for the Shipibo that can be achieved by a healer. One important indication of being a *meraya* is the ability to physically disappear.

It is said that there are no longer any living *merayas* amongst the Shipibo – although some people might like to claim this title. We asked all the interviewees in the research report that I mentioned above why they thought that very few young Shipibo people now want to follow the path to become a *médico*, let alone a *meraya*. The main reason we were consistently told in the interviews for the research report is that this path is very difficult. It requires many years of strong discipline and sacrifice. One of the conditions of *dietas* is that sexual relations (or even touching other people) have to be avoided. The older *médicos* said simply that young Shipibo people no longer wanted to do this.

My Maestro started his first plant *dieta* when he was 12 years old. In the interview with him for the previously mentioned research report, he said:

*"I first dieted when I was twelve, with my brothers ... Also my two nephews. We dieted for a year and a half, eighteen months ... This is a very strong dieta ... My brothers and I were secluded from people at a distance. Only my mother was allowed to approach us. My father and brothers and I would do ceremonies there ... We ate very dried fish, no salt or sugar. We drank tobacco juice. I almost could not stand it. I cried a lot. I was a child! "*

He received no formal schooling and cannot read or write. In his twenties, when he already had a wife and children, he moved upriver to join his birth family who had migrated to live in one of the larger Shipibo communities in the lower Ucayali between Pucallpa and Contamana.

One of the major equivocations I encounter with him concerns what it means for him to be my teacher. Many times, I felt frustrated with the lack of direct guidance and explanations that I received from him. My notion of him being my teacher implied that he would teach me in the way that I was used to after fifty years of Western education. My apprenticeship took the form of doing different plant *dietas* with him, from between ten and thirty days. In a typical year, I might do this four or five times with him.

One day, around three years after I began working with him, I had a kind of epiphany. He was singing to me in a ceremony and I suddenly realised that he had been doing, and achieving, exactly what I had asked him to. Without telling me in words I could understand, as my Shipibo is still too limited to understand what he was singing to me, he had been working with me to help me more fully take on the leadership of the nonprofit. I could suddenly appreciate that, through his help and the help of the plants that I have dieted, I was now leading the organization in a much more skilled, confident and effective way. I felt somewhat stupid that it had taken me so long to understand this. When I spoke about this later to a friend, she was very helpful in saying to me that his method of teaching was similar to that of a guru she had worked with for many years in India. The method of teaching of her guru was by direct transmission, which we are very unfamiliar with in the West.

The following is a description of the method found on a website related to Tibetan Buddhism:  
(<http://tsegyalgar.org/theteachings/dzogchen/directtransmission/>):

*"The uniqueness of the Dzogchen teaching is the direct transmission or "direct introduction" in which the master and the student find themselves in the primordial state at the same moment through one of the experiences related to body, voice or mind. Due to the power of the transmission, the students are able to discover their own real condition in this way."*

This is a good, short description of the teaching method of my Maestro, though I doubt he would ever formulate it in anything like this way.

Two more examples of equivocations come to mind. One occurred at the end of a ceremony, in my Maestro's village, which had been marked throughout by loud music and drunken shouting from a recently opened, nearby bar. I had been thinking about how the young people in the community were gravitating towards alcohol, reggaeton music, gasoline-fuelled generation of power, and other pernicious (in my view) Western influences. I began to talk to my Maestro about this and asked him how old the people were who had been at the bar. He did not seem to understand my question. When I repeated it, he answered in terms of the names of the young people whom he thought had been present at the bar and who, in the community, they were the sons of.

I did not think this reply was because he had misunderstood my Spanish. He heard me asking about these young people and instead of answering in quantitative terms about their age, he answered me in terms of their relationships to the community. We had different notions of identity: mine was in terms of age and his was in terms of relationship.

The second example is more recent when I was dieting with him and a group of people for thirty days in Yarina, the mainly indigenous part of Pucallpa. One of the people doing the *dieta* was seriously ill with prostrate and bone cancer. Towards the end of the *dieta*, the Canadian woman organizing the *dieta* asked me to translate a question from English to Spanish to my Maestro asking him what the ill person could do after he returned to his country to help him continue to get better. Again, it seemed to me that my Maestro did not understand the question, although his Spanish is good. I repeated it a number of times but did not really get a response. Afterwards, I thought that he did not understand why I was asking the question. From his point of view, he had said everything that needed to be done for the continuing treatment. I thought, afterwards, that asking him about this was potentially an insult for him and questioning his work – if he had had any more to say about how to treat the illness, he would already have said it.

Understanding better the inevitability of equivocation and that it is not a mistake or misunderstanding, but rather a means by which otherness can be seen, helps give me a window into the perplexities, confusion, frustration, joy and satisfaction of my relationship with my Maestro. I can see that I also must perplex him. He calls me 'Doctor', due to my academic title, whereas to me he is the *médico*. I call him 'Papa' all the time and he very occasionally calls me '*hijo*' (son). As Vivieros de Castro points out (2004b) his equivocations will be different from mine. In a Western world, I would try and talk to him about our relationship, how we misunderstand one another, what strategies we might use to better understand one another but I think he would have no idea what I was talking about nor would it interest him.

#### **4. Part 4.**

##### **Ending Comments**

At first I struggled with the end of this paper. How could I summarize and wrap everything up neatly, as I thought a good conclusion demanded.

Then I realized that my difficulty in doing this was because, given the nature of what I have been writing about, there is no tidy conclusion. Its nature is open-ended, unfinished, full of partial connections, equivocal rather than univocal, and necessarily resistant to an overall totalizing discourse.

To paraphrase Magritte, this is not a conclusion.

Thank you for reading this far or listening.

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