

Feel-thinking with the plants: the potential role of ayahuasca towards a reciprocal and interdependent interculturality in the Peruvian amazon¹

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¿Para qué escribe uno, si no es para juntar sus pedazos?

Desde que entramos en la escuela o la iglesia, la educación nos descuartiza: nos enseña a divorciar el alma del cuerpo y la razón del corazón.

Sabios doctores de Ética y Moral han de ser los pescadores de la costa colombiana, que inventaron la palabra *sentipensante* para definir el lenguaje que dice la verdad.

-Eduardo Galeano, *Celebración de las bodas de la razón y el corazón* (1989).

Why does one write, if not to put one's pieces together?

From the moment we enter school or church, education chops us into pieces: it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart.

The fishermen of the Colombian coast must be learned doctors of ethics and morality, for they invented the word *sentipensante*, feeling-thinking, to define language that speaks the truth.

-Eduardo Galeano, *Celebration of the Marriage of Heart and Mind* (1989)

For over four decades, the economy of the Loreto region in the Peruvian Amazon has heavily depended on oil extraction. This has been true for the big urban centers, the regional government, the local academic and research institutions, and also for many of the riverine *mestizo* and indigenous communities that inhabit the basins of the region. The economic dependence of the region on extractive industries is not a new phenomenon, nor is it the exploitation of indigenous or jungle populations by transnational corporations. The history of the Peruvian Amazon is rooted in asymmetrical power relations between

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rainforest societies and outsiders, and it has been so since the mid-16th century when Francisco de Orellana sailed the entire length of the Amazon River for the first time. Or so it is written in history books, even though the natives had likely sailed that river, the newly discovered "Rio de Orellana", for thousands of years.

After the conquest and subsequent evangelization, the rubber tragedy swept over the dark and humid lowlands. In the mid-19th century, Charles Goodyear discovered that by cooking and treating the latex extracted from the rubber trees, copious amounts of tires, bands, and other objects needed to propel the industrial revolutions of the civilized world could be produced. Men, women and children from the Witotos, Boras, Matses, Andoques and many other groups who lived in abundance and harmony, feeling-thinking³ with the jungle, were uprooted from their communities and enslaved at the service of industry and progress. Terror, as Michael Taussig (1987) tells us, was not a tool of coercion to force the Indians to work as much as a ritual, a power-affirmation ceremony. The normalization of the mutilations, rapes, and infanticides was the affirmation of colonial law over the defeated, the confirmation of the victory of one worldview over another: the triumph of civilized Judeo-Christian rationality over feeling-thinking animistic barbarism.

In modern times, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2011: 19) points towards the disappearance of two entire Amazonian peoples, the Tetetes and the Sansahauris, as an immediate consequence of oil exploitation in the Ecuadorian jungle by Texaco-Chevron. The conquest, the rubber fevers and the extractive industries of modernity –oil, timber,

³ Feel-thinking, (*Sentipensamiento* in the Spanish original) is a term collected from the popular wisdom of the Colombian Caribbean coast by the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (2009) and popularized by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano (1989), among others. To feel-think is to think with the heart, think with the feelings, in contrast with the cold sterility of cartesian rationalism and the dominant positivism. The term has been developed by Arturo Escobar (2016), "feeling-thinking with the earth", to encompass a feel-thinking that goes beyond the individual and is attuned to the flow of life in the planet.

gold, cattle, vast monocultures of palm oil and cacao-- are not only vehicles of economic exploitation: they are also vehicles of ethnocide and epistemicide, forcefully imposing specific ways of perceiving, interacting with and imagining the world we live in, relegating to alterity and oblivion the infinite diversity of ways of being and knowing.

Nowadays, the ancestral traditions, medical systems, myths, legends and worldviews of many Amazonian people have been largely supplanted by the dominant logics of modernity. Moreover, in many cases, the local has been displaced in favor of the global: the markets of Iquitos, the biggest city in one of the most biodiverse regions of the planet, are full of the ubiquitous Chilean apples and pears. Even traditional drinks such as *masato*, which plays an important role in celebrations, *mingas* and ceremonies, are rapidly being lost in the homogenizing currents of the globalized market. As a local villager from the *caserio* next to the center where I live told me: “The people here do not even know how to do the *masato* anymore. Only beer they want to drink. So good was the *masato*!”

This short preamble is merely meant to elucidate a few aspects of the complex socio-historical context in which centers that offer ayahuasca workshops operate in the Peruvian Amazon. One of these centers, near the city of Iquitos on the Nanay river basin is the Temple of the Way of Light, where I am currently working and conducting field work on a variety of projects, including a fruitful collaboration with ICEERS (the International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research and Service) and the Beckley Foundation. Ayahuasca, a central component of some Amazonian medical systems, is proving to be particularly beneficial in the treatment of psycho-spiritual afflictions such as anxiety, depression, addiction, PTSD and grief (Gonzales et al., 2017), besides enhancing general wellbeing, according to one of the most comprehensive observational studies ever done on the subject. Currently, a qualitative study is underway in order to complement the

promising quantitative results, with the data for both studies been gathered from workshop participants at the Temple of the Way of Light.

The subject of this text is not to discuss the therapeutic promise that ayahuasca holds for the aforementioned epidemics that seem to be inherent to our alienated, materialistic and consumerist societies. Neither are we discussing the well-documented impact that a recent increase in ayahuasca tourism is having on the local practices and economies, or on the availability of the ayahuasca⁴ or *chacruna*⁵ plants that make up the brew, which are becoming increasingly scarce in many regions. These issues have already been discussed by researchers such as Beatriz Labate (2014), Evgenia Fotoiu (2014) or Carlos Suarez Álvarez (2015).

Furthermore, it appears that people who remain disenchanted with the conventional healthcare systems will not stop seeking the physical, emotional and spiritual relief that they need, wherever that may lead. Neither will all the intrepid psychonauts or curious backpackers stop coming to the rainforest. If anything, with ayahuasca gaining more support and validation from different sectors of society, the flow of people to the Amazon will very likely keep increasing.

We propose that it is not enough to merely mitigate the impact that an increased western presence is having on the rainforest and its people. There is a need to move forward and actively seek to create spaces that can inspire true intercultural relationships and real networks of interdependence. It is only from these spaces that a genuine reciprocity may arise naturally. Reciprocity, I think, is the key word. For the Andean

⁴ *Banisteriopsis caapi*

⁵ *Psychotria viridis*

people, the latter is the most important pillar of *Sumaq Kausay*, or (*Buen Vivir* or “Good Living”) (Huanacuni Mamani, 2014) and is called *Ayni*.

Can the sacred principle of *Ayni* –reciprocity and interdependence as a daily practice— be incorporated into the context of a center that offers ayahuasca therapies to foreigners? In addition to being a channel of communication with the spirits of nature, a portal to the sacred and a central element in dozens of indigenous worldviews and medical systems, ayahuasca is, for many, a vehicle for personal and social transformation. Through its apparent ability to help humans reconnect with the flow of life and re-learn to feel-think, it may be a vehicle through which visitors to the rainforest can be sensitized and inspired to leave behind culturally-programmed patterns, practices and gazes that are deeply rooted in a long history of extraction, exploitation and consumerism. Furthermore, it may inspire us to increasingly seek or create environments that promote, support and engage in reciprocal relationships.

And yet this is also one of the dangers and great paradoxes of working with a master plant that teaches how to “feel-think with the earth”: in our eagerness to help spread its message and its medicine, we can easily commodify it and reduce it to another product in the free market (Peluso, 2017). Moreover, the growing scarcity of plants, to which the Temple of the Way of Light has responded by planting more than 1,000 *Banisteriopsis caapi* vines in a pilot project, is not the only extractive concern: we must also address the issues of spiritual extractivism, academic extractivism, and all other ways of interacting with indigenous wisdom that do so without necessarily reciprocating with something of real, substantial value.

I may be too optimistic, but it appears that ayahuasca may have the potential to catalyze this change in both short and long-term visitors to the Amazon. My optimism

resides in the fact that for many urban beings, these first experiences of “feeling-thinking with the earth”, experiences that are propitiated by the plants and the traditional medics that use them, and, in many modern instances, facilitated by centers such as the Temple of the Way of Light, are a first step towards a felt reconnection with nature, an important step towards dis-alienation and reincorporation into the bigger matrix of being of which we are all part. As a teacher from another tradition and of another plant once told me, "for you urban beings, the main value of these medicinal plants is to alphabetize you about nature."

Although there is still much that needs to be done in order to interact with indigenous wisdom and resources in a thoroughly reciprocal and respectful way, it is also true that it is this very wisdom that has the potential to radically reform the ways in which the dominant culture relates to other cultures, their territories and the environment, as Arturo Escobar says:

"Faced with the ecological crisis, there is now a need to recover 'intimacy' with the Earth, and this intimacy - which allows us to see ourselves as an integral part of the universe - will only be achieved through feel-thinking. Abstract knowledge, including ecology, helps us to understand what we call 'nature', but it is not enough to really understand the uninterrupted flow of life, of which all humans and nonhumans are equally part of. Re-situating the 'human' in this flow of life is one of the great imperatives of our times " (Navarrete Cardona, 2015⁶).

This reconnection with the uninterrupted flow of life is one of the effects most frequently reported by people who have had ayahuasca experiences, and is especially revolutionary and transformative in Western participants, people who come from extremely individualistic, competitive, consumerist and alienated societies (Cavnar, 2016). For these realizations to be properly integrated into the new and emergent individual worldview, however, they must be put into practice in the world, actively working towards a social and cultural change that is congruent with the emergent feeling-thinking consciousness.

⁶ The translation is mine.

An example of how this emergent feel-thinking consciousness has influenced a center that works with ayahuasca in the Peruvian Amazon is the establishment of the Chaikuni Institute. The Chaikuni Institute was born as a permaculture center in 2013, the fruit of the plant-catalyzed direct and personal experiences of interdependence experienced by the founders of the Temple of the Way of Light. In order to complement the individual healing and transformational work facilitated by the Temple, the Chaikuni Institute evolved to put into practice the indigenous wisdom of *Sumaq Kawsay*, the philosophy at the heart of the current association.

From a healthcare perspective, *Sumaq Kawsay* teaches us that it is not enough to focus on healing individual traumas or to ameliorate chronic depressions or anxieties in order to be minimally functional in a dysfunctional society, but that it is indispensable to go further and be willing to create new social structures that are in harmony and balance with all life on this planet. *Sumaq Kawsay* proposes that no one can be fully happy and healthy unless we are all happy and healthy: individual health is not independent from the health of our families, the health of our communities, societies and cultures. Our health is contingent with the health of the trees, the rivers, the forest and the ecosystems that we inhabit. One cannot live well if others live badly: Good Living implies knowing first how to live and then knowing how to live together (Huanacuni Mamani, 2014).

Thoroughly guided and informed by a deep analysis of the Amazon rainforest, its inhabitants and their rights for self-determination, the holistic model of the Chaikuni Institute is built around three interdependent axes: social and environmental justice, permaculture and indigenous integral agriculture, and intercultural education. Starting from a genuine and horizontal interculturality as the baseline, Chaikuni supports projects that are

defined by the needs and priorities expressed by the inhabitants of the Loreto region themselves.

An example of Chaikuni's work in the field of human and environmental rights is its role of accompaniment in different indigenous-led popular movements. In December 2016, with the participation of the Chaikuni Institute and after 117 days of mobilization in Saramurillo, 49 agreements were signed between indigenous federations and the Peruvian government. More than 3000 people from the Marañón, Corrientes, Pastaza, Tigre and the Chambira river-basins, hailing from Kukama, Urarinas, Achuar, Kichwa and Quechua communities, (among many other communities who are at the frontlines of the environmental devastation left by the two oldest oil fields in Peru), joined together in order to raise a unified voice against oil exploitation and the destruction of the Peruvian Amazon.

The Saramurillo agreements include an agreement for the effective remediation of the contaminated sites during 2017, accompanied by an independent inspection of several pipelines in the region, with the participation of indigenous representatives. Although it remains to be seen whether these agreements will be respected and implemented, this mobilization has managed to unite numerous indigenous peoples and the federations that represent them, helping to weave a stronger base of cooperation and cultural identity rooted on common struggles over basic human rights, such as access to clean water.

On a different level, there are also opportunities to recover the knowledge and perspectives that are essential to catalyze a paradigmatic change in human-environment relations. As argued by Arturo Escobar, the knowledge generated in territorial struggles, knowledge that is generated by feeling-thinking people who are fighting for their basic rights to clean water, among other things, is knowledge that is more appropriate to promote a social revolution than the knowledge generated in a western-centric academy since

"The knowledge generated in territorial struggles provides fundamental elements in the awareness of the profound cultural and ecological transition that we face in the interrelated crises of climate, food, energy, poverty, and meanings; And secondly, that this knowledge is particularly attuned to the needs of the Earth ... those who produce it feel-think with the Earth (they think and feel with the Earth); it points to the moment when human beings and the planet can finally coexist in a reciprocally enriching way" (2016: 18)

With this same purpose in mind, the Chaikuni Institute has allied with OEPIAP, an organization of indigenous students from the Peruvian Amazon who are attending universities in the city of Iquitos. This organization groups about 130 students hailing from 15 different ethnic groups, including, for example, the Bora people who in 1940 consisted of only 500 individuals compared to the 15,000 it had in 1910 or the Huitotos, whose population decreased from 50,000 to 7,000 between 1900 and 1912, during the rubber fever.

Intercultural education in Peru is mostly poor, and indigenous students, who for the most part speak Spanish as a second language, face economic, social, cultural and academic hardships throughout their academic journeys. In the city, they generally encounter discrimination, marginalization and social exclusion from the urban *mestizo* society. Chaikuni supports students to improve their living conditions, to empower their academic and personal trajectories, and to strengthen the organization so that they can dialogue with university and state authorities and assert their rights.

Another important and relevant element is the inclusion of these students in the community ceremonies held at the Temple of the Way of Light. Twice a month, students are offered the opportunity to drink ayahuasca with the Shipibo *medicos* who work at the center. This invitation is also open to all the local workers from the surrounding communities. Although this project is still in the formulation phase, the Temple has a long trajectory inviting indigenous leaders to participate in these ceremonies, and has helped to

empower the leaders of different federations in the creation of important alliances in defense of territorial rights in the Amazon.

If mining or oil extraction entail not only an exploitation of natural resources but also an ontological occupation (Escobar 2016), the westernization and psychologization of ayahuasca practices (Labate, 2014) may also entail an epistemological and spiritual occupation that sometimes supplants native worldviews with hegemonic ones. One of the goals in inviting these students to participate in the ayahuasca ceremonies, beyond giving them the opportunity for individual healing, is the need to incorporate their perspectives into a new ayahuasca paradigm that, paradoxically, is becoming more and more euro-centric.

This initiative seeks to provide a space where the voices of young indigenous people—their perspectives and opinions regarding the renewed interest of the West over their ancestral cultures and medical systems—can be heard. Through these voices, Chaikuni and the Temple will be better suited to create stronger alliances with the indigenous communities in their quest for the preservation and development of their cultures, practices and resources. It is a unique opportunity to find, together, the best ways in which ayahuasca can be made available to everyone who may need it in a sustainable, reciprocal and respectful way.

From a practical point of view, the main goal is to find the best practices available for a responsible accompanying process for the indigenous students who choose to drink ayahuasca at the Temple. The techniques and practices that seem to work very well for western participants, based on the structure of the western mind, are not necessarily also the best for them. By becoming more inclusive, it is an attempt to erase the artificial divisions

between "us" and "them" perpetuated by colonial historical discourses and to create spaces that are navigable and comfortable for everybody.

This is also an opportunity to learn about how distress is experienced differently in relation to culture. People from the global north generally suffer from anxiety, depression, trauma or existential crises, mental health epidemics propitiated by consumerist and individualistic societies, social realities that entail certain levels of alienation and disconnection from each other and the natural world that we inhabit. We are immersed in our biographical and personal dramas, and the psychological dimension of "healing" is usually primary. For people who, for the most part still feel-think with the earth, the narratives of affliction appear to lean towards the broader spheres of community, be it human, animal, plant, or elemental. The narratives are not necessarily built around the individual, but may draw substantially on the state of the jungle, the rivers, the health of their loved ones in their communities of origin.

Peruvian anthropologist Luisa Elvira Belaunde, during her presentation at the Second World Ayahuasca Conference in Acre, Brazil, recounted how the Jivaros of northern Peru, when speaking in their own language, say "my heart thinks" instead of "my brain thinks." According to Belaunde, they say that thoughts that arise from the brain make their way straight through the body and exit immediately from the anus. Thinking with the heart, on the other hand, connects the thoughts with the blood and the whole body, giving that thought the full force of a thoroughly circulated and heartfelt thought. This is the force inherent in feeling-thinking.

It is precisely this recognition of the importance of feeling-thinking, of maintaining a continuous direct experience of the interdependence between all spheres of life on earth, that is one of the keys not only to address these epidemics of disconnection and alienation

that engulf western societies but also, based on this reconnection with the flow of life, take a step forward towards a new paradigm of interculturality that is based on mutual respect, horizontality of knowledge and reciprocity at every level of our social, cultural and environmental interactions.

Ayahuasca is not an individual or social panacea, and while for some it may be a blessing, for others it is not so much so. It seems evident that we must do the necessary work in academic research and drug policy in order to allow the medicine of ayahuasca to reach more people, especially in the west: we need our societies to become alphabetized on nature, educated on values of reciprocity and interdependence, and taught how to feel-think with the earth. But we also need more examples of ideas, projects and organizations that are committed to make sure that all of this is done fairly, respectfully, responsibly, sustainably and in dialogue with the traditions of origin.

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