

Ícaros: The Healing Songs of Amazonian Curanderismo
and Their Relationship to Jungian Psychology

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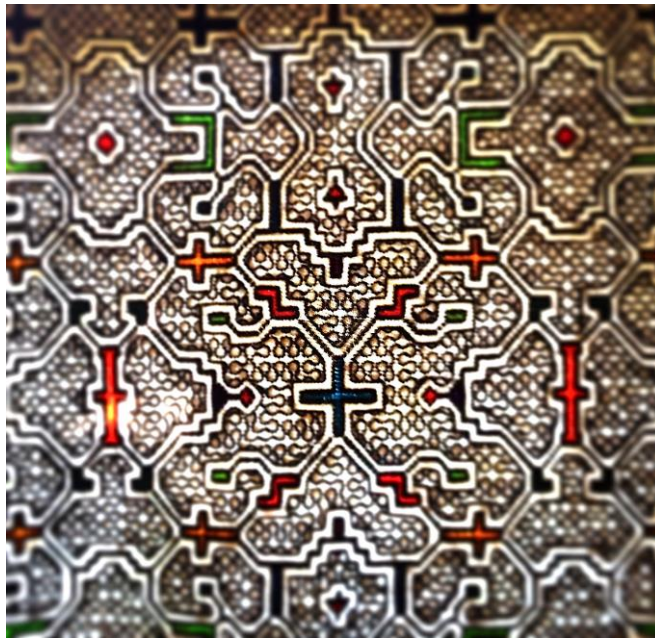


Fig. 1. Ícaro by unknown Shipiba craftswoman.
Photo by author, 2014.

Abstract

Endemic to indigenous cultures of the Amazon River basin, the *ícaro* is a healing song whose function and identity inform and animate the ideas of Jungian psychology. The *ícaro* (also spelled *ikaro*) is a well-known attribute of Peruvian culture, and is integral to the cosmovision and everyday work of traditional Amazonian healers, known as *curanderos/as*. In the context of a personal healing journey, I explore the role of the *ícaro* within the Amazonian plant medicine system, known as *vegetalismo*. For *curanderos/as*, *ícaros* are best understood as a healing tool. *Ícaros* are a synesthetic form, usually rendered through music and visual art, but also experienced through the senses of smell, touch, taste, and physical feeling. To study these songs fosters an understanding of the indigenous roots of Western art and music therapy. *Ícaros* have psychological, physical, social, spiritual, individual and community healing applications. They inhabit the dream-body, are an imaginal form, and are received in an altered state of consciousness. *Ícaros* are a gateway to the liminal realm of healing, and speak to the inter-species relationships that must be tended to create a healthy ecosystem.

Keywords: *ícaro, ikaro, curanderismo, vegetalismo, healing songs, Jung, shamanism, synesthesia, psychology, art therapy, music therapy*

It is extremely difficult for modern men [*sic*], including most modern scientists, to imagine that our ‘primitive’ ancestors were not dreaming children. This is a failure of our imagination ... we are prisoners of the present ... we lose the power to believe in the effectiveness of other systems of knowledge ... we confuse other conceptual structures with magic and the occult ... [but] when science seems to be failing, we still call in the shamans.”

Elizabeth Janeway, in Lamb (1985), p. 127

In January of 2014, I left California for an open-ended journey to work with shamans in South America. Two failed root canals had filled my head with a painful bacterial infection, and after two years of intensive antibiotic treatments, in addition to removing the infected teeth, my doctor had nothing more to offer. She gave me an MRI to rule out brain lesions, and told me to take it easy to reduce the risk of stroke.

I began to have dreams that I could heal myself by using Amazonian traditional medicine, which saturates the body with intensive plant preparations. These dreams were persistent, and permeated waking as well as sleeping life. Through dreaming percolated the intuition that this illness had ancestral, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects that would not yield to antibiotics, but could be approached through shamanism, which acknowledges that health results from addressing all of these layers, in addition to the physical body.

In the somewhat less than enviable tradition of do or die, this journey made no financial sense – but my other options made even less sense. So after finishing the coursework for an M.A. in Jungian psychology, I gathered my worldly possessions into a backpack and a roller board suitcase, and traveled to the Amazon River Basin.

On this pilgrimage, I also researched and wrote about the role of sacred song within the Amazonian *vegetalista* healing system. These songs are called *ícaros*, and I am compelled by the indigenous insistence that healing can only happen with the inclusion of this creative expression. This inquiry deepened my understanding of sacred music and art, and eased my shift from cellist and music teacher to expressive arts therapist. From a Jungian perspective, the *ícaro* is a tool that taps into the unseen but deeply felt, creative heart of healing.

Naturally, I attempted to plan this journey, but it resisted attempts at pre-arrangement. I reached non-working numbers, emails disappeared into the void, and the people I did manage to

contact could not accommodate both of my purposes: personal healing, and to complete a research project. I left the United States with no idea of where I would go, armed only with crystal clear intention, and a list of trustworthy shamans in the various cities I might visit, supplied to me by a South American psychologist who has worked for over a decade in Peru.¹

A week after my arrival in Peru, I found myself at Takiwasi, a well-established healing center in the small town of Tarapoto. Nestled in the foothills of the Andes, just above the tropical river plane that stretches the length of Perú, Tarapoto is in a more temperate rainforest than the steamy jungle of the lowland river towns. On this journey, I spent four months in Tarapoto, then three months working with healers near Pucallpa, in the north of Peru.

Takiwasi means “the house that sings” in Quechua, and this synchronicity clued me that I was at the right place. The center was opened in 1992 by Jacques Mabit, a French surgeon who came to Peru with Doctors Without Borders, studied under Peruvian *vegetalistas*, and stayed (Bustos, 2006). Takiwasi is a drug detoxification center, and accepts voluntary patients into a nine-month residential treatment program. Five years after graduation, the center reports a 67% success rate (Giove, 2002, in Bustos, 2006, p. 33), well above the 8% average rate for detoxification centers.

In addition to its intensive detoxification program, Takiwasi offers plant-based treatment for local and international clientele. Anyone can visit Takiwasi and drink plant medicines. I entered as an outpatient, and the directors kindly allowed me to conduct research in their library, which holds thousands of books on Amazonian anthropology, psychology, spirituality, and *vegetalista* medicine. I set up a quiet house in a riverside hostel around the corner, and for almost four months, walked daily to the center. There, I studied in the library, engaged in ancestral and

¹ Dr. S. Bustos, personal communication, January, 2014.

spiritual healing work, met with my psychotherapist, interviewed patients and staff, and drank medicinal plants. In a series of ceremonies, I systematically forgave and cleared negative connections with my entire ancestral lineage. I received cleansing river baths and worked with purifying and protective plants to support this work. At home, in a meditative state, I drew mandalas, read books, wrote, rested, hiked to waterfalls, bathed in rivers, and drank more medicinal plants. In all of this, the *ícaro* played a constant and important role.

The *Ícaro* Defined

The *ícaro* is a song with a healing function that arises from an ancient synergy of culture and ecology native to the Amazon River basin. The *ícaro* (also spelled *íkaro*) is a well-known attribute of Peruvian culture, and is integral to the cosmovision and everyday work of traditional Amazonian healers, known as *curanderos/as*. The word *ícaro* is commonly thought to come from the Quechua verb *ikaray*, “to blow smoke over in order to heal.” Luna (1986) calls them “magical melodies” (p. 146), as does Gebhart-Sayer (1986, p. 191).

Like any art form, the *ícaro* is a living, breathing creative expression, best understood through direct experience. Good recordings are the next best thing, and Sunyata Records’ compilation of *ícaros* from the Shipibo tribe (2006) is easy to find and beautifully made.

During this trip, I talked with approximately 100 people about their experiences with *ícaros*. These conversations included patients who were receiving treatment, students and apprentices of *vegetalismo*, a handful of dedicated *curanderos/as*, and a two masters of this healing art. I also read and reviewed over 100 written resources on the subject. My observation is that all *ícaros* have these identifiers in common:

1. Roots in Amazonian indigenous culture;
2. A specific healing function and/or ceremonial purpose;

3. Are received directly from the natural world while in a meditative state of consciousness, rather than constructed using Western compositional techniques;
4. Are considered the individual and proprietary medicine of a particular healer;
5. Although *ícaros* are most commonly experienced through music and visual art, they are a synesthetic form, and can be rendered through any of the five senses.

Musical-Historical Context

Although the *ícaro* belongs to the global genre of healing songs, it has no parallel in modern Western society, and so occupies a role that is not readily understood by the Western mind (Bustos, 2008; Dobkin del Rios & Katz, 1968; Gioia, 2006; Lamb, 1962; Mabit, 2006). To study the *ícaro* with any depth is to appreciate that it is a complex and ancient expression endemic to the Amazonian bioregion.

Hundreds of thousands of years old, as old as the human voice, the *ícaro* coils and rises from the soil of indigenous culture. Today, some pure tribal expressions remain, but the genre has incorporated many *mestizo* references. The most notable addition in the past two hundred years is Christian themes, a direct result of the Spanish conquest. The melting pot of the Rubber Boom (from 1879-1912, then again during the second World War) mixed Amazonian tribes together with other Latin American, North American, European, and African cultures, and these all influenced the music and the content of the *ícaro* (Davis, 1996; Lamb, 1962).

Some *ícaros* are composed in one tribal language, such as Ashaninka, Shipibo, Shuar, Amahuaca, or Quechua. The majority of contemporary lyrics are written in a combination of languages, most commonly Quechua (an Andean tribal language), Spanish, and one or more Amazonian indigenous languages. This lyrical style maintains an important link with the indigenous origin of *ícaros*, while allowing for *mestizo* expressions.

Icaros can be sung, whistled, chanted, or hummed, and are sometimes played on an instrument. The healer may accompany the song with a rattle, or by steadily shaking a bundle of leaves, called a *shakapa*. Practitioners may use distinct lyrics, or subsume the words with rhythmically chanted vocables. As Bruscia (1987) and Beyer (2009) point out, these are classic pattern songs, made to be improvised over. Musicologically, their most notable components are indigenous chant, Christian hymn, and folkloric strophe and stanza.

The *ícaro* has an ethereal yet physical presence, and inhabits the dreamtime, a space between earth and heaven, body and soul, time and no-time. Its particular musicality is meant to evoke and access liminal consciousness, where healing may more easily happen (Shanon, 2008). Parisi-Wilcox (2003) describes *curandero* Don Luis beginning his *ayahuasca* ceremony with an “... honoring song, a soft stream of vocables that he whisper-sang into the bottle of *ayahuasca*. Soon he switched to the whistling song, each note of which rippled through me like a ghost. Just the sound of that whistling altered my consciousness” (p. 52).

A Brief Overview of *Vegetalismo* and the *Ícaro*

Vegetalismo recognizes three main categories of medicinal plants: hallucinogens, purgatives, and master plant teachers, or *plantas maestras*. A medicinal plant can fall into one, two, or all three of these categories.

A hallucinogenic plant is one whose ingestion results in an altered state of consciousness, marked by expanded sensory experiences. A purgative plant cleanses bodily systems through purging, usually vomiting and diarrhea, and sometimes sweating or crying. A *planta maestra* is a plant with a distinct intelligence and personality, and healers relate to these plants as teachers.

There are many types of *curanderos* in the Amazon. To list a few, *hueseros* set bones, *perfumeros* give aromatic floral baths, *tabaqueros* work with tobacco, *camalongueros* center

their practice on the *camalonga* seed, *paleros* use a group of large trees, *ayahuasqueros* work mainly with their namesake, and *vegetalista* is an umbrella term for this body of healers, all of whom have specific nature-based curative knowledge.² All of these practices use *ícaros*. *Me icaraba con cantos lindos*, one might say: *the healer cured me with beautiful ceremonial songs*.

A good *curandero/a* will sometimes spontaneously change the words in an *ícaro* to accommodate the healing that is taking place; I experienced this with each *curandero/a* I met. Shamans might improvise to include the plants that the patient is dieting, to address a specific healing concern, or to call and honor their own plant spirit teachers within the session. Common wisdom is that in the hands of a skilled healer, the medicine from a plant song is equal to the physical presence of that plant.

While not all *curanderos/as* use *ayahuasca*, the brew is accepted as the queen of the Amazonian plant medicine system. Made of a masculine vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and a feminine leaf (*chakruna*, or *Psychotria viridis*), the spirit of *ayahuasca* is considered female, and belongs to each of the three main categories of medicinal plants: hallucinogenic, purgative, and *planta maestra*. For the *vegetalista*, *ayahuasca* is the matrix which gives vital information, sourced directly from the natural world, about how to balance and maintain personal and community health. To paraphrase one healer I interviewed,³ *ayahuasca* is like the director of a hospital. When forming a treatment plan, an *ayahuasquero/a* will drink it for insights and instructions. The director of the hospital might recommend one of her specialists, that is to say, a plant that can help you with your particular problem. *Ayahuasca* can't do everything all by herself, but she directs the healing.

² F. Bâcle, Takiwasi staff, personal communication, August, 2014.

³ D. Saenz, Takiwasi staff, personal communication, June, 2014.

There are as many variations on *ayahuasca* use as there are indigenous tribes in the Amazon. In some of these traditions, *ícaros* are not sung during *ayahuasca* ceremonies (Berlanda & Viegas, 2012; and personal observation). However, the vast majority of *ayahuasca* sessions not only include but are carried, contained, and driven by sacred song.

There are two main divisions among Amazonian shamans: those who heal, and those who harm others. In Peru, curative shamanism is known as *yura medicina*, a Quechua-Spanish phrase meaning “white medicine,” and is practiced by *curanderos/as*. Shamanism with the intent to harm is called *brujeria*, and is practiced by *brujos/as*. Confusing the matter, some *vegetalistas* do both types of work, but still call themselves *curanderos/as*; and tribal vocabularies employ dozens of indigenous words to identify shamans. Although each group uses *ícaros*, this article focuses on the practice of *yura medicina*.

***Ayahuasca* as Medicine**

Due to pervasive misunderstanding, it is still necessary to point out that *ayahuasca* is not a recreational drug. It is a powerful hallucinogen which, when administered correctly, cleanses the body, and yields information on how to heal disease. In Peru, it is considered medicine, and is taken only when healing is needed. Everyone in the Amazonian region of the country, from ancient times to the present, respects this bitter medicine and considers it a crucial remedy in times of duress. The Peruvian National Institute of Culture calls indigenous *ayahuasca* traditions “one of the fundamental pillars of the identity of Amazonian peoples” (Beyer, 2009, p. 12), and states that it is important to protect these rituals from “decontextualized, consumerist, and commercial Western uses” (p. 12). Here, the Peruvian Institute of Culture verbalizes the common sense perspective that it is ceremonial context, community ritual process, and its sacred character that distinguish *ayahuasca* use from recreational drug use. In the words of Peruvian *curandera*

Norma Panduro, “*Ayahuasca no es droga. Ayahuasca es medicina*” (Fotiou, 2012, p. 6).

Ayahuasca is not a drug. *Ayahuasca* is medicine.

Plants as Teachers: *Plantas con Madre*

Plants with a distinct intelligence are considered master teachers, *plantas maestras*. Each *planta maestra* is inhabited by a keen and unique single spirit, or group of spirits. This guiding spirit is called a “plant mother,” and therefore, *plantas maestras* are also called *plantas con madre* (plants with a mother). Plant mothers will come to heal and teach the dieter, and it is these spirits who impart *ícaros* (Bellier, 1998; Jauragui, Clavo, Jovel, & Pardo de Santayana, 2011; Luna, 1984b, 1986).

Based on interviews with four Peruvian *vegetalistas*, Luna (1986) details five distinct actions of plant teachers. According to his informants, *plantas maestras* do one or more of the following: produce hallucinations when ingested by themselves, influence the effects of *ayahuasca*, produce dizziness and/or nausea, are an emetic or purgative, or bring about especially vivid dreams.

Plantas maestras number in the thousands, and have been traded from the Andes to the Amazon for thousands of years (Chaumeil, Rivero, & Chaparro, 2011)⁴. *Plantas maestras* do not simply teach songs; they are responsible for carrying and teaching the entire system of Amazonian traditional medicine (Chaumeil, 1992, 1998; Chaumeil, Rivero, & Chaparro, 2011; Dobkin del Ríos, 1972; Luna, 1984b; Luna & Amaringo, 1991). One of my personal markers for a good *curandero/a*, is that he or she will continually refer to plants, and to the patient’s

⁴ J. Flores, personal communication, July, 2014; J. Eads, personal communication, August, 2014; and M. Puente, personal communication, September, 2007. Each healer I met with used medicinal plants from different regions of Peru, or traded between the Andes and the Amazon. Kallawayá shaman Martín Puente told me that he uses over one thousand plants, culled from the southern tip of Chile to the base of the Colombian Andes, and that tribal Kallawayá healers have gathered their pharmacopeias in this manner since well before recorded history.

relationship to plants, as the fundamental source of healing. While the personality and competence of the healer are important influences, the view of plants as teachers takes the healer's role out of personal ego, and places it in the collectively available consciousness of the natural world. Although a well-trained *curandero/a* is sometimes imperative, and it is very important for students to follow established guidelines under the supervision of a competent teacher, the perspective of plants as teachers empowers people to receive guidance directly from nature, without human intercession.

In the first detailed academic discussion of *plantas con madre*, Luna (1984b) coins the English term *plant spirit teacher*. Other definitive contributions include Harpignies (2007), Jauragui et. al. (2011), and shorter mentions in several books, articles, and dissertations (Berlanda & Viegas, 2012; Bustos, 2008; Chaumeil et al., 2011; Dobkin del Rios, 2008; Giove, 1993; Luna & Amaringo, 1991; Shoemaker, 2014, Tindall, 2008).

The Diet – *La Dieta*

Drinking medicinal plants in the Amazon is called “dieting plants,” *dietando plantas*. In Peru, “dieting” means simply “to adjust the diet.” Although pounds usually drop as a by-product of removing fried food, meats, dairy, and sugars from the diet, *la dieta* does not carry the North American focus on weight loss. The purpose of *la dieta* is to purify the body, so that medicinal plants are more effectively absorbed. The diet not only facilitates accelerated physical healing, it is the core spiritual practice of the Amazon.

Each Amazonian healer I conversed with, and every traditional healer referenced in literature on this topic, strongly felt that a good diet is essential to successful healing. In addition to the physical benefits of the diet, plant spirits will come to the dieter and speak through dreams. Sometimes plant spirits teach songs, making *la dieta* one of the main origins of *ícaros* (Beyer,

2009; Bustos, 2008; Lamb, 1962; Luna 1984b, 1985, 1986; Luna & Amaringo; 1991; Shoemaker, 2014). Hegen and Lansky (2012) explain the diet in detail, in the first academic article to explore the effects of *la dieta* on community consciousness.

The importance of both the diet and the *ícaro* in Amazonian traditional medicine cannot be overstated. Pérez (2003) describes one of Don Alejandro's patients who hurt his foot so badly he could not walk, who says, "I know how he cured me; I did the diet, he carried me into his house, and he sang to me" (p. 113).

The basic restrictions for a diet are: no pork, no fried food, no salt, no alcohol, no pharmaceutical or street drugs, no refined or fruit sugar, no spices, no sexuality, limited touching of and talking to others, no electricity or electronic devices, no handling of money, and no perfumes or strong-smelling personal care items. Even toothpaste must be a scentless castile soap and baking soda affair, or not used at all.

These restrictions can be followed in a modified form, in order to accommodate medicinal plant drinking in everyday life. On an intensive diet, the patient must follow the restrictions carefully, and be isolated in the forest. Dieters are housed in a *tambo*, a tiny, thatch-roofed structure, sometimes just a palm frond rain-cover without walls, made specifically for this purpose. During the isolated diet, the patient becomes highly sensitive, due in part to eating a high percentage of alkaline foods. Because of this sensitivity, the dieter cannot be seen by anyone except for the *maestro/a* or apprentice who is administering the medicine, and that *maestro/a* or apprentice must also be dieting. While in Peru, I completed two months of isolated dieting, and five months of modified dieting. Although I felt that I had completed a cycle at the end of that time, I also felt as though I had barely scratched the surface.

Diet food is bland, and the diet itself is highly restrictive, but I came to appreciate it. The diet alkalizes the body and creates a meditative state of consciousness in which *ícaros*, a fundamental vibration of the natural world, can be experienced. Plant spirits are diaphanous, ethereal, and can be driven away by strong scents, strong foods, intense emotions, and loud sounds. With the proper diet, the spirits of the plants can come close; they arrive with an electrical hum, and bring with them dreams, songs, and their own particular, highly intelligent sensibility.

During my diets, I had intense, vivid dreams, and heard parts of healing songs in dreams. I also heard songs in a sort of wakeful trance or daydream, received them from my teachers, and saw their visual patterns floating before my eyes. Although the dream-songs I received were not complete, my teachers encouraged me to make use of them. I sang to myself in my *tambo*, and sang to plants while macerating them into water for aromatic baths. *Maestros* Don Juan Flores and Don Enrique Paredes encouraged me to sing during ceremonies, saying, “You can’t learn unless you do it.”⁵

For me, healing songs are about holistic listening. I’ve learned that they are an authentic expression, and so require a sort of humble willingness to reveal the unadorned self. I’ve also learned that there is no way to approximate the splendor of celestial music; nature itself creates the most sophisticated and expressive musical arrangements. The best any of us can do is to listen, appreciate, and approximate.

All told, I subsisted on seven months of diet food in Peru, in constant cycles of intensive dieting, modified dieting, and post-dieting. By the end of my journey, I felt layer upon layer of

⁵ E. Paredes & J. Flores, personal communication, July, 2014.

plant matter inhabiting my body on the cellular level, healing various organs and permeating my being in a living, active mandala, a deep green trance.

The Purge: *La Purga*

Ayahuasca is sometimes called *la purga*, or “the purge,” because drinking it usually results in a profound catharsis of bodily systems. However, *vegetalistas* administer several other plants specifically to release toxins from various parts of the body. These include tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*, called *la medicina clásica* or “classic medicine” because of its regular use), *rosa sisa* (*Tagetes sp.*, a fungicide used for metaphysical cleansing), *yawar panga* (*Aristolochia didyma*, considered the most potent systemic cleanser), *saucó*, whose Latin name I cannot find, but which may be a relative of the elderberry, and which purifies the head and upper respiratory system; *ojé* (*Ficus insipida*, a paracide, blood and reproductive organ cleanser), *asuzena* (*Polianthes tuberosa*, a reproductive system cleanser that must be taken on the bank of a river), *purgahuasca* (a thin broth of *Banisteriopsis caapi*, *Psychotria viridis*, and *Brugmansia sauveolens*), and many others.

Some healing centers don’t do regularly scheduled purges, but maybe because it’s a detoxification center, Takiwasi offers them twice weekly. Purgative plants are considered effective on physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels. To clear my infection, I was put on *la dieta*, then given cyclical purges of different plants.

Although this may sound unorthodox, there is something reassuring about vomiting alongside community members. It provides an experience of acceptance for one’s process, as well as witness for the release of personal pain. Purging means you are taking your health seriously enough to endure discomfort, and there is something laudable, even celebratory about that.

During my time at Takiwasi, those destined for *la purga* arrived in the *maloca* at 3 p.m. to sit on low stools in a circle, and drink down servings of freshly macerated plant juices. The *maloca* is the traditional Peruvian meeting room, usually oval or circular, with open-air walls and a thatched palm-frond roof. After waiting ten minutes or so, to allow the purgative to settle into the body, each participant drinks two liters of warm water in quick succession. This results in vomiting, directed into a bucket. This process takes about two hours; the facilitator contains the space by singing *ícaros*, and by cleansing participants with a *shakapa*, perfumes such as *agua florida*, and raw tobacco smoke (*mapacho*, or *Nicotiana rustica*). If a certain purgative plant is used in the *maloca* that day, the facilitator calls it by name in an *ícaro*.

How *Ícaros* are Received and Transmitted

It is commonly accepted in the Amazon that *ícaros* are received directly from the spirits of plants (Beyer, 2009; Bustos, 2008; Jauregui et. al., 2011; Luna, 1984b, 1986; McDonald, 2012; Ott, 1994; and personal observation). This can happen spontaneously while dieting, or while participating in an *ayahuasca* ceremony. In addition, a person can be given *ícaros* by a teacher, or by a friend. One can also steal a song, and use it without the permission of its originator. The latter is obviously not a recommended practice.

Ícaros can also come through dreams. Personally, I have dreamed songs, as clearly as if they were being sung to me in waking life. I've not yet been able to entirely remember any one of these dream-songs. The *curanderos/as* of the Paredes family told me that I simply needed to diet longer, and after a few months, I would begin to remember whole songs. Several other dieters I met also reported the phenomenon of receiving parts of *ícaros* in dreams;⁶ in Perez

⁶ F. Bâcle, Takiwasi staff, personal communication, August, 2014; Alejandro, Takiwasi patient, personal communication, June, 2014; Mauro, apprentice of J. Flores, personal communication, July, 2014; and M. Paredes, personal communication, July, 2014.

(2003), Don Alejandro says, *Los espíritus nos enseñan en sueños a cantar*, the spirits teach us in dreams how to sing (p. 84).

Doña Mariela Paredes, a *curandera* I spent six weeks with near Honoria, Perú, shared an example of how healing songs can be received during an *ayahuasca* ceremony.⁷ She described going into a trance during a ritual, while she was in the midst of a yearlong secluded diet. She envisioned the plant-spirits she was dieting, and saw their *madres* or plant-spirits dancing, accompanied by beautiful music, and a woman singing. She told me that she thought someone else was singing, and was surprised when other participants told her that the beautiful music was in fact coming from her own voice. She remembered these songs, and they became part of her shamanic repertoire.

One can certainly hear the voices of plants without drinking a hallucinogenic tea; hearing them seems only to require a subtle, meditative state of mind. And it seems that this conversation is a two-way street; *ícaros* appear to be how people and plants to communicate, in this part of the world.

Influence of the Rubber Boom on *Ícaros*

The Amazon rainforest is commonly and scientifically known as one of the world's richest and most diverse repositories of natural resources, and once covered almost one-third of the South American continent. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the mass-produced automobile motivated a global rush for rubber, a resin secreted by the tree *Hevea brasiliensis*. This was the first industrial-scale blow to this once pristine forest. Since 1970, logging, mining, oil drilling, and destructive farming techniques have destroyed over one-fifth of the Amazon (<http://rainforests.mongabay.com>).

⁷ M. Paredes, personal communication, July, 2014.

The 1880's Rubber Boom signaled the beginning of wholesale, rapacious extraction of the region's natural resources (Davis, 1996). Today, large-scale exploitation of this highly diverse and delicate ecosystem, without regard for either short or long-term wellbeing, is the single most urgent problem *curanderos/as* face. The habitat that generates their medicines, the forest that safeguards their way of life, is being sucked dry of its native oil, trees, animals, metals, and soil at approximately one football field per minute.

Destruction of the Amazon is not a localized problem. This zone is such a rich cache, such a vital organ for our planet, that it affects global health in very direct ways. Commonly known as the lungs of the Earth, the Amazon forest produces twenty percent of our global oxygen supply (Cooper, 2007).

In the 1930's, synthetic rubber production and the first successful rubber plantations ended the blitz on latex-producing Amazonian trees. In its wake reverberated a bloody social, ecological, and financial legacy (Davis, 1996). Fifty years of rubber frenzy had enslaved, tortured, and displaced hundreds of thousands of indigenous Amazonians, and wiped out whole tribes. These injustices made a permanent mark on the development of Amazonian native cultures. Decimated tribes banded together as natives struggled to keep their way of life intact, fusing and many times losing distinct cultural practices, including plant-based medical knowledge.

Modern *ícaros* reflect this cultural fusion, and vary in style and content according to the populations that use them.

Jihui Rao Murrayabo Rabi Tsinquitash Behuacani Nete

Contemporary Shipibo people have adapted an age-old ritual to counteract intensifying exploitation of native Amazonian habitat.⁸ Healer Joseph Eads brought this ceremony to my attention; he learned it from his teacher, Shipibo *murraya* (the Shipibo word for shaman) Netenmeny Tangoa. In the Shipibo language, *jihui rao murrayabo rabi tsinquitash behuacani nete* means “a ritual to heal the *plantas maestras*.” Oral tradition maintains that the Shipibo have done this ceremony annually for hundreds of years, but fell out of use in the past century. *Murraya* Tangoa says, “In current times it [the ritual of *jihui rao*] is all the more called for, because the *madres* of the *plantas maestras* are being affected by extermination of the Amazon forests, threatening continuity of our tribe’s ancestral wisdom.”⁹ *Murraya* Tangoa describes the particular soul-burden healers face when a medicinal plant becomes extinct, and describes the *madres* of plants as weeping, bleeding, and wounded, due to their widespread mistreatment. The *jihui rao* ritual has a healing effect on the ecosystem, and helps to reciprocally nourish the connection between tribal healers and medicinal plants. During this ceremony, *plantas maestras* are called and honored via song.

How Ícaros Are Used

The *ícaro* has psychological, physical, spiritual, emotional, and social applications. It is used on personal and community levels to calm the nerves, as standard or spontaneously delivered prayer, or to influence the speed and content of visions. *Ícaros* are also used to decrease nausea or pain, to find a lost object, to visit a person remotely, for defense and protection, to invoke assistance from plants, animals, minerals, or spirits, to catalyze love, for hunting, fishing, or to influence the weather, and to soothe or energize patients (Bustos, 2008;

⁸ J. Eads, personal communication, October, 2014.

⁹ J. Eads, personal communication, October, 2014.

Giove, 1993; Lamb, 1962; Luna, 1984a, 1984b, 1986; Luna & Amaringo, 1991; Mabit, 2006; Matteson & Baer, 1992; Perez, 2012; Shoemaker, 2014, Tindall, 2008).

A layperson might refer to any song sung in ceremony as an *ícaro*, while *curanderos/as* use a more detailed definition. For traditional healers, *ícaros* are best understood as a healing tool (Mabit, 2006).

The Ícaro as a Survival Adaptation

At its root, the *ícaro* is a practical tool for survival. Indigenous people have used them for centuries, maybe millennia, to survive within their forest home. Lamb (1962), in his biography of Amahuaca-trained *curandero* Manuel Córdova-Ríos, records some of the most detailed accounts of chant used to direct the content of visions. Córdova-Ríos, kidnapped as a teenager by the Amahuaca tribe during the first wave of the Rubber Boom, is one of the few *mestizos* to experience initiation into a pre-industrial tribal *ayahuasca* culture. Much like watching a movie, Chief Xuma taught Córdova-Ríos to hunt in the rainforest, to wildcraft and prepare edible and medicinal plants, and to lead the Amahuaca people as a chief, via tutelary visions during *ayahuasca* sessions. The ability to direct visions via song in order to teach and to learn is, by all accounts, “a highly evolved power” (Lamb, 1962, p. ix).

An interesting anecdote about Lamb’s first biography of Córdova-Ríos is that young Harvard medical student Andrew Weil arranged for its 1974 reprinting, “because it contained so much information about the potentials of the human mind” (Weil, in Lamb, 1962, p. ix). Weil later became famous in the 1990’s for his popular approach to holistic and integrative medicine.

The Ícaro as a Psychological Healing Tool

Transmitted and remembered in the mind, dreamed in the consciousness between species, and touching on all aspects of the mental-emotional-physical continuum, *ícaros*

delineate a culturally specific cognitive process. Amazonian and Western healers approach psychological issues differently; for indigenous people, a mental imbalance could be the result of a curse or a negative spirit, influences that are not acknowledged by mainstream Western psychology (Dobkin del Ríos, 1972, 1992, 2008). Jaime Torres, one of the directors at Takiwasi, commented that due to differences like this, not all indigenous healers are qualified to treat international clientele. Indigenous and *mestizo* healers must carefully study the Western lifestyle, in order to effectively address the distinct constructs and issues of the Western mind.¹⁰ This same principle applies to Western health care professionals who treat indigenous clients.

Most printed information about the psychological healing capacity of *ícaros* is found in doctoral research, and in published dissertations. The most thorough scientific study on the psychological healing effects of the *ícaro* is Bustos' (2008) dissertation. Bustos identifies thirty dynamic, contextual "meaning constituents" (p. v) that describe the experience of receiving healing through an *ícaro*. Her discussion of how the patient interacts with these components illuminates the role of the *ícaro* as an analytic healing tool.

Giove (1993) has written beautiful narratives on the embodiment of the *ícaro*, and its connection with mental, creative and feeling states. Matteson and Baer (1992) record uses of *ícaros* across tribes, including case studies with specific examples of psychological healing, such as anxiety reduction. McDonald's dissertation (2012) on spontaneously emerging healing songs focuses on the experience of the healer, and makes a case for the use of non-invasive healing songs in Western healthcare settings.

¹⁰ J. Torres, personal communication, August, 2014.

Culture-Specific Uses of Amazonian Tribal Sacred Song

Like any complex institution, the *ícaro* carries the paradox of unity and diversity. For those interested in diverse, distinct tribal musical practices, Berlanda and Viegas (2012) provide an anthropological overview of almost forty Amazonian tribes. The majority of these entries include details on the use of healing songs. Pellizzarro (1978) writes comprehensively on the uses of *ayahuasca* specific to the Shuar tribe. His study contains a Shuar dictionary, as well as translations of several Shuar *ícaros* (pp. 189-284).

Brazilian syncretic *ayahuasca* churches incorporate elements of the *ícaro* in their hymns, and in their doctrine. The Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, and Barquinha churches are the spiritual offspring of the Rubber Boom, and use *ayahuasca* as a sacrament. These sects blend Amazonian shamanism with Catholicism, Kardecist spiritism, and African traditional religions (Labate, 2014). Their music is formalized as communally sung hymns, which cannot be called *ícaros*, but each these churches includes Amazonian indigenous cultural references in its music.

The *Ícaro* Outside of Ceremony

Although some believe that *ícaros* are only sung in ceremony, it's common practice to sing them in everyday life. Personally, I use these songs to lift my spirits or focus my mind while going about the mundane motions of life. In her description of Takiwasi's therapeutic model, Bustos (2006) shows the profound healing and community-building effects that ceremonial healing songs have when they are woven into the everyday life of a community.

While on this recent trip to Peru, it seemed to me that I, and most of people I met who were immersed in the study of *vegetalismo*, were constantly humming healing songs. These songs weave in and out of ritual, travel inside and outside of dreams, the body, and the mind, effortlessly permeating layers of consciousness with their healing messages.

Sacred Song as an Activator of Plant Medicines

Almost every day during my time in Peru, I witnessed a *curandero/a* or an apprentice using a song to energize a plant preparation. I picked up the habit, and began privately singing to my daily plant beverages. In Amazonian regions, this behavior is accepted without comment, although it doesn't seem very well understood by the majority of the world.

Manuel Córdova-Ríos hilariously describes this cross-cultural barrier (Lamb, 1962). He tells the story of a New York based pharmaceutical company who he supplied with ingredients for an Amazonian medicinal concoction. The recipe didn't work, although the company followed it to the letter. When they asked Córdova-Ríos why their efforts were not successful, he drolly asked if they had sung the proper songs while preparing the medicine in their sterile laboratory. Although Córdova-Ríos was already responsible for the Western world's first reliable supply of *curare*, an Amazonian hunting poison whose chemical constituents revolutionized modern surgery, this was not a question the scientists were ready to consider.

In the same vein, Joel Swirdlow, a scientific journalist investigating plant medicine, collected samples of leaves used by shamans in Madagascar to heal cancer. Half of these samples had been sung over by a shaman, and the other half had not. When analyzed by a Swiss laboratory, only the leaves that had received songs contained the anti-cancer compound (Beyer, 2009).

Ícaros Used to Call Protection and a Plant Mother

Near Honoria, Perú, *curandera* Doña Mariela Paredes sang me an *ícaro* to call a certain species of birds. When she sang the song in ceremony, these birds would fly in a circle above the *maloca* to protect the session. Doña Mariela also sang me an *ícaro* to call the medicine of the *came renaco* tree [*Ficus schultesii*], a plant used for strengthening bones and healing internal

injuries. She described the *madre* of this tree as a group of beautiful, fairy-like spirits who dance in a circle around the tree as they sing.

***Ícaros* as a Prayer of Thanksgiving to the Plants**

For master *curandero* Don Juan Flores, *el ícaro es el agradecimiento a las plantas*; the *ícaro* is a prayer of thanksgiving to the plants.¹¹ In a recent study of focused versus diffuse attitude, the focused qualities of gratitude and respect are shown to increase positive outcomes (Wilcock, 2013). Considering that most medicine is derived from natural substances, and that the human body itself is made of natural materials, expressing gratitude and respect for the natural world may increase positive medical treatment outcomes.

Doña Mariela Paredes¹² and two apprentices of Don Juan Flores¹³ shared with me the idea that the photosynthetic activity in plants is equal to the light of Christ. This idea seems to have originated with Don Juan Flores (Tindall, 2008), who is the eldest teacher in this group. As Doña Mariela says, photosynthesis is proof that God has given us plants to heal us; photosynthesis is an expression of the Christ Light. This perspective seems to reconcile any potential conflict between Christian and indigenous beliefs.

Personal Healing Experiences Via *Ícaro*

Dreaming the Plant Body

Towards the end of my trip, I spent three months drinking plants with *maestros* and *maestras* near Pucallpa, Peru. As I dieted *wakra renaco* (*Ficus pertusa*) in isolation to heal an umbilical hernia, I dreamed myself curled up like a fetus inside the trunk of a massive *wakra renaco* tree. The next day, I hiked to visit the very tree whose sticky latex sap was mending me,

¹¹ J. Flores, personal communication, June, 2014.

¹² M. Paredes, personal communication, July, 2014.

¹³ Mauro and Henaté, apprentices of J. Flores, personal communication, July, 2014.

and it was indeed massive, easily large enough to contain several of me. I drank the sap of this tree on a strict diet for fifteen days, during which this dream recurred:

I sleep in fetal position, floating inside the belly of the tree, connected to its slow-moving inner workings via my umbilical cord. The thick white sap of the tree fills my body, pumping an immense peace and strength through my veins.

His body, my body; his blood, my blood.

When I asked *curandero* Bellisario Paredes how he had extracted the sap, he told me that the tree must be approached on a new moon, in the morning before the sun rises, offered tobacco, and sung to, before cutting through the bark and allowing the medicine to flow.¹⁴ It felt to me, alone in the forest dreaming, that the song, the healing, the vision, and the honoring of the tree were one.

The Flute and the Datura Flower (*Brugmansia sp.*)

One of the most profound healing experiences I had with an *ícaro* was with Henaté, an apprentice of Maestro Don Juan Flores, near Honoria, Perú, when Henaté played his flute and sang to me after the close of an *ayahuasca* ceremony. Don Juan's ceremonial room, or *maloca*, is built on top of a boiling hot creek, raised on stilts, and planted all around and underneath with medicinal plants. Clouds of steam infused with plant medicine billow up through gaps in the rustic wooden floorboards.

During this ceremony, Don Juan and his apprentices called the vapor with song, and it flowed into the ceremonial room in exponential quantities, arriving in steady plumes from the volcanic wetlands below. These intoxicating clouds of medicinal vapor from outside mixed with the medicines used inside the *maloca*: plant-based perfumes, raw tobacco smoke (*mapacho*), and

¹⁴ B. Paredes, personal communication, July, 2014.

palo santo smoke.

After the maestro closed the ceremony, Henaté kept piping on his flute. His phrases started out well-formed, but soon devolved into strange bursts and cacophonous tangles; he seemed delighted to rest on jarring dissonances for long periods of time. After a brief while, Henaté's idiot-savant flute music was driving people insane. Everyone got up and left, and I almost joined the exodus. But as I activated the soft glow of my headlamp and began to gather my belongings, I became aware of the smell of purple datura flowers wafting through the floorboards. Henaté's flute was calling the datura flower (*Brugmansia sp.*), known regionally as *Toé* medicine, and I realized suddenly that the plant was infusing me with her essence, agitating my mind. *Ah, I remember now: they say Toé makes you crazy.*

Like most *curanderos/as*, Don Juan Flores prepares *ayahuasca* with a small amount of *Toé*. That evening, as he served *ayahuasca*, he had sat with several bottles surrounding him, choosing from different batches for each person. I had received an extra dose of datura, fortunately in a manageable amount. Don Juan Flores is a master *curandero* who has plied his trade for over fifty years; this was not a mistake.

I decided to stay in the *maloca*, relax, and commune for the first time with *Toé*. For years, I had avoided this plant, and with very good reason: its lore is replete with stories of people ingesting it, going insane and never recovering their senses. It is known to kill in the wrong dosage. In its shamanic initiations, the novice consumes *Toé* under the close supervision of her or his teachers, subsequently loses and then summons the strength to regain the mind. A mind reconstructed in this manner is understood to have been purified by the *Toé* plant.

My experience was nowhere near that dramatic, but I did receive a gentle introduction to *Toé*. Henaté's fractured fluting drove people away, and eventually, I was the only one left in the

maloca. I lay down, covered myself with blankets, and submitted to his crazy music. I recognized fragments of Don Juan's healing songs, deconstructed almost beyond recognition. The deeper I surrendered, the more the music resonated with my state of mind; harmonic dissonances entered my interior, perfectly matched with specific mental dissonances. Labyrinthine melodies described dissociative loops. I followed this mental-musical connection deeply into a corner of my mind that housed a particular neurotic morass, and the flute defined its unfortunate threads.

My ears opened wider, and I heard the clicking and humming of jungle insects in the forest outside the *maloca*. Below us billowed the boiling creek, and the flute danced through it all. Henaté was not imposing his music; he was at one with the night.

In my sonorous, vaporous dream, I saw a crew of tiny, industrious spiders enter the recesses of my mind, just as they might enter the folds of a tree trunk. As the music untied mental-emotional knots, these diminutive gray spiders kindly and quickly swept up the webby detritus. Somehow the shaman and I were perfectly synchronized; just as the spiders finished their work, Henaté's flute came to a graceful cadenza, and my visions faded away along with his music.

In the morning, I admired the prolific purple *Toé* that Don Juan cultivates around his *maloca*, her violet blossoms winking from behind the boiling river's foggy veil. When needed, this medicine infuses his ceremonies, called with song from the steaming creek below.

Another shaman, Don Enrique Paredes, also showed me through example how completely the *ícaro* is an expression of the natural world. He sang the same *ícaros* at each of the 13 *ayahuasca* sessions I drank with him, but each time, his songs sounded different. He set his tone, volume, and tempo in harmony with the sounds of nature. His songs faded into being in

perfect time with the chirping of insects. The call of an owl might inspire a momentary rest, and the beat of a bat's wings, or a gust of wind flickering a candle became a rhythmic fill. The *ícaro* is not an overlaid experience, nor sung into a void; it is a profound resonance with nature, an act of deep listening.¹⁵

Synesthesia

The *ícaro* can be experienced through any of the senses. Perception via multiple senses is called synesthesia; the Western art-therapy term for this phenomenon is multi-modal. In my conversations, I noticed that some people feel healing songs primarily as a physical sensation or vibration in the body, while others tend to see the song as a vision. Sometimes smells are associated with a song, and sometimes the aural or musical qualities of the *ícaro* will expand and harmonize into an amplified sonic experience.

Probably anyone who has ever drunk *ayahuasca* will testify that to some extent, their sensory perceptions were affected. In Viegas and Roldán's 2003 study of 100 *ayahuasca* drinkers, 90% experienced a change in the quality of ambient sounds, and 92% report an increase in auditory perception (in Berlanda & Viegas, 2012, p. 338). 70% of participants describe synesthetic activity such as "hearing a vision" (p. 338), and 49% say these experiences were notable, or extreme (p. 338). The researchers also point out that some Amazonian languages have words that mean "to listen to color" or "to see a sound" (p. 345).

In ceremony, songs are felt, and their vibrational patterns become visible. Plant *madres* can appear, evoked by sacred song. Amaringo's paintings illustrate these phenomena (Luna & Amaringo, 1991). Before devoting his life to his art, Pablo Amaringo worked as a well-respected *curandero* for almost a decade, and his paintings provide a unique view of synesthesia in

¹⁵ The concept of deep listening is the life work of musician and composer Pauline Oliveros; for an overview, see Oliveros' website, www.deeplisting.org.

Amazonian healing practices. Amaringo's work also provides as one of the clearest visual records of what a plant spirit teacher looks like, from the viewpoint of a *curandero*. In 1988, Amaringo founded the *Uskar-Ayar* (translated from Quechua as "divine or wise prince") School of Amazonian Art, and his style has evolved and proliferated among his students.

In my conversations with patients, residents, and staff at the healing centers I visited, I heard many synesthetic ceremonial stories. Joan Parisi-Wilcox (2003) describes a multi-modal experience during an *ayahuasca* ceremony: she is flying in her vision, and

... entered the thick, tangled green canopy ... I was leaning against the tree stroking the Vine of the Soul, and she was responding to my touch by changing color with my every stroke. Each color had a sound, so that through my stroking, with each color shift, I was causing a symphony of sound almost too beautiful to bear (p. 54).

This article focuses on the *ícaro* as a musical form and as a vehicle for healing, but the ubiquity of synesthetic experience provides inspiration for more work. Possibilities include a catalogue that corresponds musical & visual *ícaros*, the relationship of *ícaros* to dreams, or to the natural world; how *ícaros* speak to the Western concept and practice of expressive arts therapy; depictions of the *ícaro* in contemporary Latin American art; or the songs of women healers. Because of the rate at which the forest is disappearing, there is an urgent need for recordings and transcriptions of the songs of Amazonian tribes, and of master *curanderos/as*.

Synesthetic Connection with Art Therapy

With approximately twenty thousand members, the Shipibo-Conibo tribe is one of the largest in the Amazon, and has a particularly ancient and sophisticated relationship with the *ícaro*, in its full synesthetic expression (Gebhart-Sayer, 1984, 1985, 1986; J. Eads, personal communication, July, 2014). Modern Shipibo clothing, language, musical expression, bodily

adornment, architecture, artwork, healing ceremony, collective and individual life are full of *ícaros*. This close relationship between artistic expression and healing activity within an indigenous culture is a vital example of the origins of contemporary expressive arts therapy.

To this day, German anthropologist Angelika Gebhart-Sayer's (1984, 1985, 1986) studies of the Shipibo-Conibo tribe provide the most in-depth Western examination of synesthesia in a Native Amazonian *ayahuasca* culture. Drawing on Ridington (in Gebhart-Sayer, 1986), Gebhart-Sayer describes the *ícaro* as simultaneously image and song, and includes fragrance, dream, dance, and patterns in nature as expressions of the *ícaro*. She is one of the first to note the connection between indigenous culture and Western art therapy, saying, "The magical melodies and *ayahuasca*-inspired art, as much as the entheogenic effects of the potion itself, are thought to lead to an 'aesthetic frame of mind' considered vital to the healing process: music and art as therapy" (p. 191). Significant contributions to this theme can also be found in Bellier (1998); Beyer (2009); Brabec-De Mori & de Brabec (2009a, 2009b); Bustos (2008); Harpignies (2007); Kenny (1982, 1989, 1995, 2006); Lamb (1962); Luna and Amaringo (1991); and Reichel-Dolmatoff (1986, 1996).

Connection with Music Therapy

There is an obvious, though complex relationship between the *ícaro* and Western music therapy. Although the subject is too extensive to do justice in this short article, I will synopsise this connection by observing that modern music therapy has ancient roots, and that this fact is not fully acknowledged in the West.

In today's mainstream Western culture, many people believe that music, dancing and singing are enjoyable and healthy, but are skeptical about their healing capacity, especially in scientific or therapeutic settings. Gioia (2006) notes that modern Western music therapy "...

bear[s] a striking resemblance, in practice if not in theory, to anthropological accounts of the healing practices of Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, and African tribes ... these similarities are rarely remarked on by the practitioners of these modern movements (p. 131).”

Fortunately, in my role as a music therapist, I notice that this attitude is slowly changing. Several psychologists honor the connection between indigenous and Western cultures, as does a small but global sub-set of musicians and artists. In Peru, I met a several *mestizo*, white, and indigenous musicians, artists, healers, and psychologists who are working to bridge native and Western worlds. Kenny (1982, 1989, 1995, 2006; Kenny & Ngaroimata, 2013), a music therapist and indigenous studies professor at Antioch University, is the author to most thoroughly develop the association between indigenous musical expression and Western music therapy.

In my first career I worked as a classically trained cellist and music teacher. That background gives me a special appreciation for the way indigenous cultures integrate performance and healing, and for the distinctions between secular and healing music. I feel that acknowledging the role of song within traditional medicine systems can deepen my understanding of music as medicine, and of creativity as a healing agent. Socially, this acknowledgment can also foster respect between indigenous and modern cultures.

The Visual *Ícaro*

Visual and musical representations of the *ícaro* are called by the same name. All Amazonian tribes use some form of healing song or chant, and most also produce visual art that intimately relates to their sacred songs (Berlanda & Viegas, 2012). Among this diversity of expression, the distinctive needlepoint designs and painted ceramic vessels of the Shipibo-Conibo people have come to define the visual *ícaro* as a modern popular icon. Shipibo visual

artwork is instantly recognizable to almost anyone who has traveled to the Amazon, or who is even mildly familiar with Peruvian culture.

For the Shipibo, *ícaros* emanate from the mythic Cosmic Serpent, whose electric, undulating, multi-dimensional body creates past, present, and future. Her name is *Ronín Kené*, and like the *ícaro*, the intricate vibrations she produces simultaneously permeate all of the senses. After her, Shipibo visual *ícaro* patterns are sometimes called *kené*, or *quené* (Gebhart-Sayer, 1986). Shipibo artwork is distinguished by wavelike, geometric, multi-colored patterns that recall the serpent's electric movements and shimmering rainbow skin. Ashaninka artwork also expresses this undulating, geometric quality. Among Amazonian peoples, for whom *ayahuasca* use is an integral part of life, snake imagery relates to both the Cosmic Serpent and to the snake-like, twisting *ayahuasca* vine (Narby, 1998).

Although most visual expressions of the *ícaro* are made in needlepoint or painted on ceramic, they can also be carved into or painted on wood, or drawn with berry juice on parchment, or on the body. *Ícaros* decorate the walls of houses and ceremonial rooms, and have sacred as well as secular uses (Gebhart-Sayer, 1984, 1985, 1986). In the Amazonian regions of Peru, *ícaros* are a popular touristic craft, and painted versions adorn public establishments like restaurants, telephone booths, and municipal buildings. Modern Shipibo craftspeople sometimes create *ícaros* with acrylic paints, but these are generally considered less effective, and less beautiful, than those made with natural dyes.

Shipibo visual *ícaros* are linked to songs, and sometimes also contain a written message, somewhat akin to the Egyptian pictographic alphabet. Shipibo dancers describe sacred patterns in the dust with their feet as they follow tribally specific choreography (Gebhart-Sayer, 1986).

The dance celebrates the music, the music is recorded as visual art, and each of these creative forms contain the messages and movements of the Mother Snake.

Tribal dances and other indigenous traditions began to disappear during the Rubber Boom, and this loss markedly accelerated approximately thirty years ago. Amazonian tribes are now organizing to revive and preserve their cultural roots.

Mandala Use in the Visual Ícaro

The majority of contemporary visual *ícaros* incorporate a circular form, or mandala. The Shipibo see the circle as a symbolic container for their healing ceremonies, and so border their mandalas with patterns representing protective plants, elements and animals, such as the mountain, the lake, the boa, or the piranha.¹⁶ Although some mandala patterns have been canonized into family or village traditions, and are recreated over and over, what goes inside the circle is ultimately up to the artist.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of years after indigenous Amazonian mandala-makers honed their holy craft, Carl Jung called the mandala “...an image whose occurrence is attested throughout the ages. It signifies a wholeness of the Self ... the wholeness of the psychic ground, or, to put it in mythic terms, the divinity incarnate in man” (Jung, 1961/1989, pp. 334-35). Jung devoted almost forty years of study to mandalas, and described his own mandala making, and that of his clients, as a sacred process (Jung, 1950/1968). Like *ícaro* mandalas, the mandalas of Jung and his clients contain snake imagery, and inspirations from the natural world.

¹⁶ Gisela, Shipiba craftswoman, personal communication, May, 2014.

The *Ícaro* and Jungian Psychology

The Unconscious

In Jungian psychology, the contents of the unconscious are accessed through dreaming, or through creative activities that call up latent, suppressed, or evolving awareness (Jung, 1936/1968). When hidden aspects of the psyche become conscious, the individual can use the information these bring for self-expansion, expression, or refinement; Jung called this process individuation. The release of suppressed content is sometimes accompanied by an increase in personal energy, or by moments of inspiration or creativity. Jung believed that integrating unconscious material into consciousness allows us to more fully know the essential self, and to live an authentic life.

Dr. Jacques Mabit speaks of this process, as he describes his own reception of *ícaros* (2006):

I have not yet received all the *ícaros* ... Neither do I know what subconscious mechanism could have brought me these nor if they really work ... Deeply buried within each and every one of us is a knowledge of life, hidden away and estranged from our consciousness by an excess of external stimuli and the misuse of our bodies. Given the right conditions, this knowledge can come out unexpectedly, illuminating a path which we have never seen before (p. 4).

The “right conditions” to which Mabit refers are brought about, in part, by respectful dieting of plants, within the tradition of legitimate (as opposed to touristic) *vegetalismo*. Dieting sensitizes both the body and the psyche, and encourages a meditative state of consciousness in which we more naturally access our interior depths.

Jung accessed his unconscious primarily through imagination, creativity, and dream work. *Vegetalismo* shares these methods, but differs from Jung's approach in its total integration of and reliance on the natural world. This dedicated interplay with the vibrancy of nature is a meaningful way to connect with the deep wisdom housed in the unconscious.

Non-Dualism

Vegetalismo is non-dualistic, as it streams from the indigenous legacy of holistic, nature-based vision. *Vegetalistas* accept that our dynamic relationship with the natural world is made of undifferentiated energies. Belief, habit, moralism, religion, and other cultural constructs encourage us to separate and then label our experiences as good or bad. Nature itself makes no such distinctions.

Jung speaks to the human tendency to dualize our experiences (1929/1961). He writes, "In my picture of the world there is a vast outer realm and an equally vast inner realm; between these two stands man, facing now one and now the other, and, according to temperament and disposition, taking the one for the absolute truth by denying or sacrificing the other" (p. 337 [CW 9, para. 777]).

According to Jung, the human species has an inclination to reside at the intersection of the inner and outer worlds. I would add that we are also habitually stationed at the intersection of the left and the right brain, the indigenous and the Western, the creative and the logical. Learning to accept the dynamic flow between polarities, instead of embracing one side and disapproving of the other, provides an opportunity to move towards non-dualistic wholeness. The *ícaro* is a particularly potent tool for this kind of psychic integration: it spans the senses, defies Western logic, and is radically inclusive in its implicit assertion that the world is utterly sentient. It is a denizen of the dream world, yet has physical manifestations that one can touch, hear, taste, smell, and see.

Alchemy

In Jung's work, internal unification, or psychic wholeness, is symbolized by the alchemical philosopher's stone (Jung, 1929/1953). The *vegetalista* journey is fundamentally one of personal transformation (Lewis, 2008), and can be understood as alchemy. Its main medicine, *ayahuasca*, is processed in a closed vessel, or alchemical cauldron. Just as in alchemy, the *vegetalista* path is distinguished by experiences of unity, individuation, fermentation, solution, calcination, and death, and its non-linear stages are marked by chemical reactions and core changes. Edinger (1991) writes eloquently and definitively on alchemical stages, in relationship to the psychotherapy.

More than once in my healing process, I found myself submerged in a river, dissolving into the current as a *curandero* sang over me, calling the water, the mermaids, the fish, the watercourse animals and plants to assist in my healing. Alchemy uses the icon of the king and queen in the bath to describe this elemental experience (Jung, 1929/1953). Immersion in water signals the alchemical phase of *solutio*, and is what Edinger (1991) calls an "archetypal image of transformation" (p. xix).

Solutio is dissolution in water. The transformative power of water is easily visible in its ability to rust iron, in its capacity to form rock and sand, or in the function of urine. Psychologically, water represents the feminine, flowing, emotional aspect of the Self, and immersion in water "represents a further breaking down of the artificial structures of the psyche by total immersion in the unconscious, non-rational, feminine, or rejected part of our minds" (Dismore, 2011). This breaking up and washing away of rigid psychic material can be felt as purification, and can allow acceptance, emotions, and creativity to flow more freely.

Eco-Psychology

The *ícaro* has clear resonance with the neo-Jungian branch of eco-psychology (Taylor, 2009), in that it is dependent on the health of the forest ecosystem for its existence. *Ícaros* are a resonant transformative node, rooted in the unabridged valuing of nature. Valuing nature is one of the fundamental gifts of genius entrusted to the modern world by indigenous peoples. As Reichel-Dolmatoff (1996) writes, “The Indians’ understanding of the forest as threshold and transformer is a sphere which is yet little explored and less appreciated (p. 177).”

Shipibo *murraya* Netenmeny Tangoa¹⁷ elegantly summarizes this ecological bond:

We are as much an expression of nature and life as the forests are – we share with them the very same bestowing of Life force that's in all living beings, including the forests. The elders say that the *plantas maestras*, because they are sentient, can see and behold us just as we see and behold them. When they look at us, they say, ‘the people are sick, some are dying, some decaying, and their hearts are confused - as are their bodies and minds, but there is still enough good to make them well again.’ They, like us, need only look upon us to see this, just as we look out upon the forests and can see their condition.

Mystery Is Value: Image, Archetype, and Ancestry

The *ícaro* is both an archetypal representation of, and a conduit for, the mysterious healing force that resides within any reciprocal relationship with nature. The multi-modal art forms of the Amazon provide a window into its ineffable character. The *ícaro* represents the gifts of the unseen: the long, invisible arc of ancestral wisdom, the healing capacity of spirits, vibration that makes and un-makes form, and a sacrosanct valuing of the natural world. Sacred song is an untouchable presence, an intangible but supremely potent catalyst.

¹⁷ J. Eads, personal communication, October, 2014.

Hillman (1977) and Berry (2008) find that archetypal qualities emerge in any image not through structure, symbol, or emotive resonance, but through experiencing the authentic, exact wholeness of the image, in all its “unfathomable analogical richness” (Hillman, 1977, p. 82). The *ícaro* is just such an imaginal form: multi-faceted, whole, and original, the ever-evolving expression of a boundless, immeasurable cosmic concept, and only realized through direct experience.

Hummingbird Synchronicity

In July of 2014, *curandero* Don Juan Flores gifted me with an *ícaro* that calls the hummingbird. As I received this song during an *ayahuasca* ceremony, I had a vision of a hummingbird hovering over my head, repairing and aligning my heart with the flitting dance of its honeyed beak. For many cultures, the hummingbird is a symbol of love, and of the heart; its name in Spanish is *chuparosa*, “rose-sucker,” and in Portuguese *beija flor*, “flower-kisser.” After receiving this song, hummingbirds began to appear to me consistently, and some of my close relationships aligned in new and helpful ways, including my relationship with myself.

This coincidence of inner and outer worlds illustrates the synchrony of the *ícaro*. They appear to be simple songs, but their liveliness permeates several layers of experience at once. The *ícaro* is malleable, moving, real: it is not fixed inside a static symbol (Hillman). Jung (1952/1972) alluded to this connective motion in his description of synchronicity as “an acausal connecting principle” (p. 417).

Resonant with Jungian values, *vegetalismo* seeks to heal not only the body but also the soul. Mauro, one of Don Juan’s apprentices, puts it this way: “The plants are here to cure the body. The songs of the plants, the *ícaros*, cure the soul and the spirit.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Mauro, apprentice of J. Flores, personal communication, July 2, 2014.

Integration: Returning to the United States

Integrating these experiences into my everyday life in the United States has been a slow, patient process. I no longer have symptoms of meningitis, and while that is important, I find that this extended immersion into the songs of plants has deeply transformed not just my head, but also my whole being.

Although this is changing, North American culture doesn't yet recognize plants as intelligent, or songs as sentient. European fairy tales showing Western acceptance of plant consciousness exist, such as Andersen's (1851) story about the elder tree mother, but such stories are, in general, relegated to the realms of fantasy. I feel fortunate to live in Portland, Oregon, where a grassroots groundswell of plant medicine practitioners recognizes plants as teachers.

About a month before my return to the United States, while still in Peru, I began dreaming with the red cedar tree (*Thuja plicata*). Upon my arrival in the States, I learned that this tree is the matriarch of the Pacific Northwest, the ancestral mother of this forest¹⁹. She was calling me back, welcoming me home, soothing me with the simple but crucial message that plants are everywhere.

Working as a psychologist gives me opportunities to explore what I learned on this journey. I have a private practice based in expressive arts therapy, and work for a public agency serving homeless people with persistent mental issues. A bridge between worlds, *ícaros* enrich my understanding of expressive therapies, and keep me grounded in cross-cultural respect. Continuing to study them connects me with the nourishment of nature, and brings lightness, effectiveness, and joy.

¹⁹ S. Kloos, personal communication, September, 2014.

Over time, I see more fully how *vegetalismo* is a path, not a destination. Healing in this system is an alignment with the intelligence of the natural world, not an isolated event.

Appropriate remuneration concerns aside, Amazonian traditional medicine offers the world a balanced way of life, not another commodity.

To acknowledge that the soul and the spirit are real, inhabit both the individual body and the body of our planet, and have a direct impact on our personal and collective health; and that these massive yet subtle connections are worth preserving, respecting, and nourishing, is the meaning at the heart of the *ícaro*.

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