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Working with Plants who have Mothers

Dialogues with a Shipibo *onanya*

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José López Sánchez is a researcher, Shipibo *onanya* and Director of the *Shipibo Rao* healing centre in the Peruvian Amazon. The word "*onanya*" is often translated as *curandero* or healer, or as *ayahuasquero*, a person who works with ayahuasca. Literally, it could be translated as "person who knows".

WORKING WITH PLANTS WHO HAVE MOTHERS-
Dialogues with a Shipibo *onanya*, 2024
296 pp., col. 21.5 x 28 cm
ISBN 978-84-16470-41-9

© 2024, José López Sánchez: diálogos
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© 2025 Emilia Sanabria: epilogue (English version)

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This research was made possible thanks to funding from the European Research Council, Grant n°757589 "Healing Encounters: reinventing an Indigenous medicine in the clinic and beyond" lead by Emilia Sanabria and based at CERMES3 (Université Paris Cité, EHESS, CNRS, INSERM)

We extend our deepest gratitude to Emmanuel for financing the translation of this book.
Your support made it possible for this work to reach new readers and to continue its purpose of sharing knowledge beyond linguistic boundaries.

Special thanks are extended to Silvia Garza for the financial support provided for the layout and design of this book. Their commitment to editorial quality and to the dissemination of knowledge has been fundamental to the completion of this publication.

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Dedicated to:

Jhonas Reynaldo López Ruiz
Andrius Fabiano López Ruiz
Bría Ines López Vásquez
Mía Fernanda Vargas Vásquez
Eléonore Pettiaux Mesturini
Luce Isadora Chartier Sanabria

and to all the daughters and sons and future generations

Acknowledgements

We would like to begin by thanking our sons and daughters for demanding of us the deepest shared struggle that underpins this book, for encouraging us to say what needs to be said and done for future generations and for showing us our responsibility to embody the link that we are to the grandmothers and grandfathers and to the futures that we call into existence. This book is dedicated to all of these people.

We thank the *Healing Encounters project: reinventing an Indigenous medicine in the clinic and beyond* and in particular its architect and director, Emilia Sanabria, for offering a framework concerned with respecting Indigenous knowledge and practices and for creating the *Healing Encounters* collective with its numerous and inspiring spaces of exchange, for their reading-groups and suggestions, which have supported the realisation of this book. We thank each and every one of its members and guests, in particular Piera Talin, Pietro Benedito and Isabel de Rose.

Our thanks to the *European Research Council* (ERC-2017 STG-757589) and the support of the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research) for funding the work, the trips, and the time needed to write this book. To the CERMES3 laboratory for welcoming this book at the institutional and administrative level.

We thank Allison Vásquez Sánchez and Amy Vásquez Sánchez for participating in the dialogues. To all the patients who have participated over the years with their trust and dedication. Thanks to the workers at *Shipibo Rao*. To the people, families and centres that support *Shipibo Rao* in its specificity but also as part of a wider collective. We thank in particular the *Temple of the Way of Light* in Iquitos.

Our thanks to Claude Guislain for facilitating the first meetings between us and our families. To Javier Marco Barba for the first steps in Europe and to Anne-Laure Vincke for our work together. To Lirian Martínez and Elvira García for their friendship and support. To Fleur Courtois and Isabelle Stengers for their presence, advice and rereading throughout the years. To Silvia Garza Garza for her detailed editing and for her interest in publishing this book. To Joanne Hutchinson for her precious and passionate help translating the book into English.

José López Sánchez and Silvia Mesturini Cappo

Note

The content of this book has emerged from evolving practices and constant dialogues between humans and non-humans; between experts and patients. We highlight this because this knowledge is in constant transformation. It could happen that a reader reads this text and some aspects have changed. We know that the act of writing leads to a fixing of ideas, stories and images and we hope that we manage to transmit, between the lines and the depths that we are sharing here, the organic movement which underpins these medicinal practices.

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INTRODUCTION

CIVILISING THE GRINGO: ENCOUNTERS, DIPLOMACY AND COSMOPOLITICS

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

The publication of this book has been made possible thanks to the anthropological, feminist and decolonial research collective within the project *Healing Encounters: Reinventing Indigenous Medicine in the Clinic and Beyond"*[1]. Multiple processes enabled the writing of this book, involving many different layers and folds. This introduction aims to offer some contextual elements to guide the reader.

Onanya, Rao and Ayahuascaine

This book presents the words of a Shipibo *onanya*[2] from the Peruvian Amazon in the form of a dialogue. Shipibo *onanya* are people who are experts in what they have come to name their "traditional medicine".

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[1] https://encounters.cnrs.fr/es/

[2] The Shipibo term *onanya* is related to the verb *onanti*, which is translated into Spanish as knowledge, understanding: "to know, to comprehend". (Loriot, Lauriault y Day, 2008): lit. "with knowledge" or "the one who knows". It is often translated locally and nationally as *"curandero"* or *"ayahuasquero"*. *Onanya* are also frequently described as locally "those who heal with plants" or "those who know how to work with plants". The term Shipibo used in this book refers to an ethnic group whose complete name is Shipibo-Conibo-Xetebo. These are three peoples, from the *pano* linguistic family, who are currently mostly bilingual in Shipibo and Spanish. It is important to note that these are river people, located principally along the banks of one of the major waterways in the central Peruvian Amazon region: the Ucayali. According to figures from the 2017 national census, there are approximately 33,000 Shipibo-Conibo-Xetebo People who live in 153 registered communities. The population figures do not reflect the considerable number of Shipibo who live in urban areas. See: https://www.inei.gob.pe/media/MenuRecursivo/publicaciones_digitales/Est/Lib1598/ TOMO_01.pdf

What José López Sánchez presents here is based on what he has learned and practiced, as well as what he wants to defend today with regards to his expertise. What he shares with us in these conversations is not a "compendium of his medicine", but rather a narrative about how that medicine is being submitted to multiple forms of extraction. We are referring here to appropriation, and with that the transformation that is impacting and damaging the ethical and political integrity required by his practice and all the beings that reside within it. José speaks about the demands that emerge from his work, and indeed, he questions the new forms that have been created by the friction between one world which he defines as old and another which he sees as modern. He also refers us to the prophecies of the elders (his grandparents and great-grandparents) that not only predicted this change of life, but also detailed how the Shipibo would be deprived of their rich and united ways of living with and within the rainforest. José remembers how evangelisation and trade have eroded the old forms of trust and have destroyed that which protected ancestral ways of coexistence. The *onanya* and the *meraya*[3] were (and continue to be) the main victims of the locally established Christian religion[4]. In current times, they continue to be attacked, and even killed, as José mentions, "but in a different way"[5], by the commodification

[3] The *meraya* are known for having a higher level of knowledge and initiation than the *onanya*. It is necessary to receive the dietas of a meraya to become one. It is often said that the *meraya* have disappeared in current times. The term *meraya* is linked to the verb *merati*, which has a number of translations. It is translated into Spanish as the verb "to find", "find" or "to visit" (Loriot, Lauriault y Day, 2008). José translates *meraya* as "the one who finds".

[4] On the question of evangelisation (first catholic and then protestant) and its impact on what Françoise Morin terms as "Shipibo-Konibo shamanism", see her 2015 article: "Resiliencia y exibilidad del chamanismo shipibo-konibo (Perú)", Antropologica 57 (353-366).

[5] Some works give a localized account of the contemporary commercialization of ayahuasca and the programs of the retreat centres which are built for this purpose in the Peruvian Amazon in general and among the Shipibo in particular: among the books on the internationalisation of ayahuasca, see Beatriz Labate and Clancy Cavnar (eds.) 2014: "*Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond*" Oxford University Press and by the same editors, in 2018: *"The expanding World Ayahuasca Diaspora. Appropriation, integration and legislation "*, Routledge. For more information on the Shipibo participation in the commercialisation of their practices, see: Doriane Slaghenauffi, 2020: "Le chamanisme Shipibo à l'épreuve de la modernité" *Anthropologie et Sociétés*, 44 (3), and the chapter by Bernd Brabec de Mori "From the Native Point of view. How Shipibo-Konibo Experience and Interpret Ayahuasca Drinking with 'Gringos'" in the book already mentioned in this footnote *"Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond"*.

of their practices, their plants and their expertise (in a kind of colonial-marketing that can be summarised by the idea "they are transforming this into ayahuascaine[6]").

The term "ayahuascaine", which has echoes of the word cocaine, serves as an emblem of what can happen to plants, and in particular to plants that "have a mother". Ayahuasca has a mother, José tells us. All the plants that we do *dieta* with have a mother. That is why ayahuasca cannot be transformed into ayahuascaine, because *she* has a mother[7].

The book begins with this discussion, with the aim of showing the way in which ayahuasca is currently being destroyed. Ayahuascaine is what is left once the mothers of the plants leave or are forced to leave. The transformation of ayahuasca into ayahuascaine happens due to a loss of respect for the mothers of the plants and the arrival of another kind of spirit that José calls "pharmaceutical". The "pharmaceutical" spirit is similar to the difficult-to-define "gringo" spirit, that runs throughout this whole book: a spirit with other demands, other types of practice and other experts[8].

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[6] José López Sánchez uses the term "ayahuascaine" to indicate the current transformations of the traditional vegetal decoction that has today become well known and used internationally as "ayahuasca". In the Shipibo language, ayahuasca is called *oni* or *nishikon*. This preparation is habitually described internationally on the basis of its two main components: a vine (*Banisteriopsis Caapi, Malpighiaceae*) and a bush (*Chacruna Viridis, Rubiaceae*) or of its "active" components (DMT Dimethyltryptamine in *Chacruna Viridis* and a digestive inhibitor - MAOI, monoamine oxidase inhibitors in Banisteriopsis Caapi). This whole book seeks to value counter-perspectives in response to the internationalisation and commodification of this substance.

[7] The conversations with José shed light on how to understand and approach these "mothers", guardians, spirits, owners of the plants. Finding an adequate translation or the correct way to talk about the *Ibo* or *Yoshin* in Shipibo is precisely one of the challenges posed in the dialogues that run throughout the book, also see Translators' Glossary - Mothers of Plants.

[8] For an idea of the universe of clinical and pharmacological research in which ayahuasca has found herself, especially as a "psychedelic" substance, see, for example, the article by dos Santos et al. (2016, *Therapeutic Advances in Psychopharmacology*) which presents a referenced synthesis of 25 years of clinical trials. Since that time, other trials have been carried out and are still currently ongoing. See, in particular, the articles published by the journal *Frontiers in Pharmacology* in 2022.

It is important to mention that here the term "gringo" does not refer to specific people, but to ways of doing and thinking which can be shared by both foreigners and Amazonians. The perspectives that José presents are based on twenty years of experience working with international clients, or patients (as he prefers to call them), interested in "traditional" Shipibo practices. José began working with foreigners when he was employed by travel agencies and international empresarios, owners of healing centres situated in distinct parts of the Peruvian Amazon. Later he participated in the creation of the *Niwe Rao* healing centre owned by his family, with his mother and sisters. Today, José has created his own healing centre, *Shipibo Rao*, where he designs *dietas* in his own way, adapted for his international patients. This "situates" his intention to talk about what has become important for him and what needs to be defended within his knowledge and his practice. What can be understood as "traditional" within his practice is the result of this encounter with other mindsets and other ways of doing, both local and international, in which he perceives some differences, some contrasts, which need to be named. The term "traditional" does not signify something old and fixed but is instead a process of living actualisation in the present. Indicating that something is "traditional" enables an emphasis on that which is at risk of being lost and needs to be activated and updated in contemporary encounters between *Shipibo onanya* and their patients.

By using the term "gringo", as both a noun and a qualifying adjective, José wishes to indicate what is being placed at risk by commodification and contemporary forms of colonialism and appropriation. The desire to address this risk is the point of encounter between his practice as an *onanya* working with a foreign public, and my practice as an ethnographer working in a feminist and decolonial collective. For my part, this process of experimental co-authoring is born out of a position within anthropology that renounces the intention of "explaining" the "other". Instead, we are experimenting with establishing a space, which Isabelle Stengers would call "cosmopolitical diplomacy". A space for shared struggles that give a voice to humans and non-humans, for our shared resistance to the destruction of the relations that allow our world to exist, or that make a world exist in a particular way. This space has been emerging from what our encounter permitted us and demanded of us and from what together we want to "make matter"[9]. In this encounter,

we have recognised each other as two researchers, both working on the same subject, but from different learning traditions and with different research protocols.

How can entire worlds of complex practices of learning and collaborative relationships with certain plants, *rao*[10], that have the power to heal and teach, be reduced to the consumption of "substances"? What is lost and muted through this reduction? In a clear and pragmatic way, José transmits what the international *ayahuasquero* community needs to hear and understand to be able to approach the *onanya*, their knowledge and their collaboration with the plants, in a more relevant and respectful way. Thanks to the time that we spent together and the practices we shared, José and I have learned to forge a distinctive alliance leading to transmitting together what the *onanya* defend and preserve. For this to exist it was necessary to take into account the asymmetrical relationships that are part of the encounter between foreign clients and Indigenous professionals in the current (neo) colonial context. In the West, our "white" or "gringo" ways of approaching, understanding and seeking healing need to be accompanied by questionings and warnings about how to try and do this without continuously activating colonial processes; without appropriating the practices, the plants, the knowledge and the legitimacy of others. This is slippery and dangerous ground, and José's words warn us about the traps and dangers that we repeat, at times despite our good intentions. From his point of view, some current practices can be a deadly poison and a challenge for his medicine. The medicine that he defends is a practice that must be cultivated in certain ways so that its roots are kept alive.

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[9] In the preface to the 2022 reedition of Isabelle Stengers "Cosmopolitiques", Les Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond, La Découverte, (1997), pp. 13-17 (Book available in English as: "Cosmopolitics", University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[10] In Spanish (Loriot, Lauriault y Day 2008), the Shipibo term *"rao"* has four possible translations: plant remedy, plant poison, antidote and a reference to the generic notion of "medicine". As this attempt to translate the term into Spanish suggests, the term reflects the Shipibo use in which we can find the idea of *pharmakon*, where that which heals can also harm, or poison. This also describes the possibility to simultaneously heal and harm which can be situated in both plants and medical knowledge. For an ethnobotany and a taxonomy of Shipibo medicinal plants, see the synthesis in the chapter "Ethnobotany of the Shipibo-Konibo" (Tournon et al.) *in Folia. Universitatis Agriculturae et silviculturae mendelianae brunesis*, VII, 2014, 6.

This need for roots is experienced via a "living knowledge" that sprouts from practices known as "*dietas*"[11]. The *dietas* enable seeking, sensing and maintaining ancestral relationships with certain plants, *rao*. The *dieta* is one of the matters that runs through the whole book. José speaks to us about old and modern *dietas*; he tells us what a *dieta* should be and what it has become to adapt and serve modern and international patients. Let us observe, for the moment, as an introduction, that *onanya* acquire their competency by doing *dietas*. This implies complex and interrelated dynamics of cleaning and purification, care and learning, in which non-humans, above all plants in their different forms and facets, carry out an important and inextricable role. The *dietas* are practices of social isolation during which important nutritional and behavioural restrictions are observed. Periods of dry fasting (without food or water) intensify the daily *dietas*. Each *dieta* implies a time dedicated to approaching, familiarising oneself with, and learning from a particular plant in order to get to know her. Each *dieta* with each plant can last weeks, months or years, and each *onanya* has years and years of accumulated *dietas* that enable them to know more than a hundred medicinal plants[12]. Doing *dieta* means learning to sense the plants: sensing what they demand and how they demand it. José, like other *onanya* around him, call these interactions *"pruebas"*[13]. The plants "give *pruebas*", José explains, to show us ourselves from their point of view: they connect us with our traumas, they show us what needs to be healed.

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[11] In the anthropological literature on the practices of *dieta* in the Indigenous Amazon, some authors have insisted on the importance of rules of abstinence and isolation (Juaregui et al. 2011; SanzBiset and Cañigueral 2011; O'Shaughnessy and Berlowitz 2021); others have analysed these practices in terms of initiation (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997; Juaregui et al. 2011) or apprenticeship (Fotiou 2017; 2019; Dev 2018; 2020); others have insisted on therapeutic or even medical value (O'Shaughnessy and Berlowitz 2021), while a few have approached these practices from the point of view of "taboo" and "food shamanism" (Gearin and Labate 2018).

[12] For an ethnobotanical list of "plants with a mother", plants that it is possible to do *dieta* with in traditional Shipibo practices (and also in part among the Ashaninka, Matsiguenga and Mestizos) see the article by X. Juaregui, Z.M. Clavo, E.M. Jovel, M. Pardo-de-Santayana (2011): "Plantas con madre: Plants that teach and guide in the shamanic initiation process in East-Central Peruvian Amazon", *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 134: pp. 739-752.

[13] See Translators' Glossary: *"Prueba"*. This word could be translated as "test" but we chose to keep it in Spanish. It stands for an important concept within Jose's theorization of traditional medicine. Healing and learning means traversing these "tests", these *pruebas*. It entails being put to the test by plants but also embracing the test as a healing and learning opportunity. It also means becoming capable of recognizing what a *prueba* is, when and how it manifests in one's life.

Today, “ayahuasca ceremonies” and “master plant *dietas*” are the two Shipibo practices that have become most standardised in “programs” of “retreats” for international clients. What are the consequences of these transformations? José is concerned about preserving that which according to him “roots” the *dietas*. Learning by doing *dieta*, maintaining a communicative sensitivity with the medicinal plants and respecting the integrity that collaborative relationships with them demand, are central elements for the defence of traditional practices and for that which needs to be activated and modernised today.

This book therefore explores a sensitive, living methodology, grounded in practice, of investigating and processing the knowledge of which José is a carrier and a mediator. Far from being about gaining knowledge for its own sake, this attempt to disseminate is the fruit of a shared search for possible forms of collaboration. Therefore, the contents of the book arise from experimental practice and are rooted in experience.

In this landscape of encounter and divergence between *onanya* and foreigners, old *dietas* and modern *dietas*, it seems to us indispensable to identify contemporary dynamics of extraction in relation to ayahuasca and everything that surrounds it: the extraction of knowledge, practices, plants, plant preparations, and people. This challenge recalls colonial history and what persists of it today. José sketches this landscape for us in simple terms, talking about the realities, places and networks that populate his life.

In this scenario, infrastructure has been built within the Peruvian Amzon that enables a growing number of travellers from Europe and North America, to journey to Peru to begin -or continue- their initiations with local experts in traditional medicine. At the same time, this scenario is also created by the fact that more and more *onanya* travel to Europe, the United States and other places to perform ayahuasca ceremonies. This gives rise to local resistance which aims to contain this commercialization and internationalization of plants, knowledge and traditional practice and also gives rise to new forms of competition between *onanya* with respect to accessing an international clientele. Within this landscape we also find more and more "Westerners" who want

to become experts in Amazonian plants and the knowledge that accompanies them.

The dialogues presented here question foreign understandings of the role of plants, of what they are or can be, as well as foreign understandings of the decoctions prepared with them, and in particular, ayahuasca. We will see how the simple term "plant" is a complex ontological and political issue. The ways of understanding what a plant is, what a plant can do and how to practice the possibility of an encounter with a plant, opens up not only diverse ways of being in the world, but also opens up different worlds, plural and multiple[14]. This puts into perspective the impact of international interest in local plants and practices and is at the root of all the experience that José calls upon so that he can defend, remember, readjust and reweave his practices and his words in a different way. While acknowledging that cooking a plant means harvesting it, and that collecting it means extracting it, doing so with respect mobilizes a set of ethical and technical skills, which signify a particular way of being and feeling in the world.

The possibility of "extracting well" and the experiential pluriverse that opens up with a well-done extraction, disrupts the landscape created by contemporary international interest in ayahuasca and the ritual practices associated with it. Along with these issues of extraction and commodification, this book understands references to "tradition" and to what is celebrated as "old" in a particular way. The relationship between tradition and modernity, but also between what is described as Indigenous and non-Indigenous, moves from a Eurocentric understanding towards a dense, mixed and expanded vision. One might be tempted to say that what is shared in these dialogues relies on an "Indigenous perspective" on ayahuasca and traditional Shipibo practices. However, this would be taking the "easy path" which, as José often says, is a quick response to an urgent need, but which ultimately leads to us missing what the situation requires. In fact, the points of view that

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[14] In terms of the encounter between Indigenous wisdom, science and the possibility of learning with plants, see the book by the researcher, botanist and professor, from the Potowatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer: *"Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants"* (2013, Milkweed Editions, Canada).

intertwine in this book sketch a more complex and contrasting landscape. Knowing what is "Indigenous", or what can be designated as such, remains a constant challenge for José, an urban Shipibo who travels and works in international networks. Although the difference between "Indigenous" and "gringo" continues to appear in the dialogues, in most cases these entities are not clearly embodied by specific individuals, but cross over as part of a shared colonial heritage, experienced according to asymmetries of power that cannot be forgotten and that are still in force, albeit in different ways. The challenge is to explore how anyone, including the Shipibo, can behave or become "gringo" (*"engringuizarse"*). And, at the same time, to be able to discern in each person what is "gringo" and what is not.

Through José's words, we also discover that the very notion of a "Shipibo community" involves many complexities. José presents us with a Shipibo people threatened and harmed by centuries of colonization, evangelization, extraction and commodification, dynamics that continue with the same force today, but in different forms. He also describes a Shipibo people in which no one can claim to be independent of money, in which their relationship with the rainforest and the territories has been completely disrupted, has become static, sedentary and commercial. A history in which no one, not even the Shipibo, have been able to prevent the trade in gold, oil, gas and, above all, timber, while impoverished territories and continuous deforestation ruin mixed ecologies, empty rivers of their fish and are a setback, for humans and non-humans, to millenary ways of life.

By talking about how the *onanya* learned "wildly" in the context of the *dietas*, José invites us to understand particular ways of learning that involve feeling and especially "feeling with others". He introduces us to processes of discovery about what matters and is transformed through the differences and benefits of interspecies relationships: these can be therapeutic, spiritual and ecological at the same time, and entail a way of thinking, feeling and becoming in relation to others. Collaborating with plants, *rao*, means being able to feel them and understand what the collaboration requires. Healing is about learning to feel the presence of plants and transforming oneself accordingly. In the same way, to heal another is to lend oneself to feel, with the human-plant ensemble that

constitutes the *onanya*, what that other person carries inside and what makes them sick. These relationships depend and co-depend on a practice of respect and sensitivity.

"Encounter and diplomatic instauration"

This introduction began by describing the finished version of the book: a conversation composed of questions and answers. The structure of the text might suggest the idea of a classic binary encounter: a researcher who asks questions to an Indigenous person who gives their answers. It is therefore important to clarify here that the questions in the text were written at the end of a process of composition and assembly that had different layers and that was informed by various collectives involved in this process. I am thinking of the collective from the *Healing Encounters* project - Pietro Benedito, Isabel De Rose, Emilia Sanabria and Piera Talin – and of the numerous group exchanges that have situated this book within a questioning of how ayahuasca is circulating today between the rainforest, urban spaces and clinical trials[15]. I am also thinking of the presence, in many of the conversations, of Allison Michell Vásquez López and Amy Vásquez López – José López Sánchez' wife and sister-in-law – who brought a non-Indigenous Amazonian perspective to the conversations, given that they are not Shipibo, and who opened up important issues with respect to the local context in which José's healing practices are situated. Finally, I am thinking of the eco-feminist collective Atelier Souriau[16], whose members include, among others, the scientific philosopher Isabelle Stengers, who has been accompanying my research stance as a "diplomat". This stance appears more clearly throughout the introductory notes to each chapter of the book.

Finding the right questions was a collaborative process rooted in sharing, nurtured over many years and involving many people. The

[15] The *Healing Encounters* project is composed of three sub-projects: Healing in the Forest, Healing in the City and Healing in the Lab, although our research explores the modalities and consequences of the interconnecting and crosscutting place of ayahuasca between these different fields.

"dialogical" format is in fact an editorial choice that enabled the writing down of complex collaboration processes between various humans and non-humans. The collaboration was born and was consolidated thanks to the friendship between an ethnographer and an *onanya*, each surrounded by their own respective communities. Within this polyphony of beings, we thought creatively about methods and conditions for our encounter. Surrounded by our communities and collectives, we explored the themes we considered vital for the combined relations that rooted our respective situations. There were several diverse kinds of communities involved in this venture: communities of origin, family communities, scientific communities, patient communities. They appear in different ways in the content and shape of this book. Indeed, the process we followed to achieve our aims was open-ended and experimental.

The dialogue format is to be understood, therefore, as an attempt to express complex processes of encounter and collaboration for our readers. José's words are his own, recorded on particular occasions which we will further detail later in this introduction. Parallel to the recordings, the sequence of questions and answers and the structure of the book are informed by many conversations with José that have not been recorded, and by exchanges with the collectives that have accompanied this book project. The introductions to each chapter, the footnotes and the emphasis placed on some of José's expressions and images throughout the chapters, enable the reader to situate the work as what it seems pertinent to me to call a "diplomatic instauration". Instauration because it has been a process, an open-ended and uncertain journey, experimental and without guarantees. Diplomatic because of the effort to emphasize and open up possible readings to those different communities - therapeutic and scientific, local and international, political and ecological - that through us, have constantly populated our encounter.

At the same time, it is essential to recognise José's "diplomatic instauration" within the encounter. His desire and decision to write a

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[16] This *Atelier* is one of the collectives of the GECo (*Groupe d'Etudes Constructivistes*) of the Université Libre in Brussels. Its members include Fleur Courtois-L'Heureux, Valérie Glansdorff, Isabelle Rouquette, Marcelle Stroobants, Fabien Miche, Antoine Habiyambere and Kobe Matthys.

book stem from the desire to give voice to plants, traditional practices and experts in the face of the arrival of new experts and the circulation of these same plants and practices outside of traditional care. Simultaneously, José makes a diplomatic effort by attempting to put his vision and experience and the beings that inhabit it into words and dialogue with scholarly research.

In fact, this book responds to an attempt to establish a space of "cosmopolitical parliament" where a plurality of knowledges and ways of producing knowledge are sustained without the need to reach a consensus, either in the form of a general method or through results that could be generalized or adapted to all situations. All the people who have participated in this book have supported its experimental character, or as Stengers formulated in her cosmopolitics, they have been experimenters of singular possibilities that support the search for achievements that are, "neither explainable nor miraculous, but promising"[17].

"Preparing the ground: encounter, method and collaboration"

Before going into the dialogue itself, it seems important to me to describe how the ground was prepared in which the collaboration was planted, how the seeds were sown and the shoots cared for, so that the leaves, fruits and flowers could later be harvested and used to prepare the final flavours of this co-authorship.

The dialogue that has been re-edited here is the result of a space of trust which started around 2015, when I got to know José's family: firstly, his mother and sisters, and then José himself. The conversations that took place throughout the years were not recorded. It was essential for me, as a researcher, to take the necessary time to allow myself to be transformed by these encounters. And encounters certainly took place. The process of work and friendship between an *onanya* and an

[17] Ibid, Stengers pp. 13-17.

ethnographer is the very basis of what has been converted into this common and shared research. This relationship was built over time, both in spaces and moments when Shipibo *onanya* usually meet with foreign "clients" or "patients" (such as ayahuasca ceremonies or retreats, sometimes in the Amazon, sometimes in Europe), as well as behind the scenes and on the sidelines of these events. The multiplicity of these shared spaces enabled us to savour transformational processes with the plants and with Shipibo medicine practices, experiencing different environments "outside" of these practices. And it is in this "outside" space that our reflections, dilemmas, emergencies and struggles have acquired greater shape and colour. We have joined our efforts, searching for how to resist the extraction of knowledge, a central theme in the ethics of the methodologies explored collectively in the *Healing Encounters* project. Countering the spell of extraction could only be done by unravelling as accurately as possible the extractive practices that run through current approaches to Shipibo medicine and by writing together, about what some call "ayahuasca tourism" each from our own situated experience.

José grew up in a Shipibo community in Ucayali, in the central Peruvian Amazon region (chapter 5). From the age of 7 he followed a traditional *dieta* apprenticeship under the direction of his grandfather, a *meraya*. After his grandfather's death, he joined his parents, brothers and sisters in the urban area of Pucallpa. His apprenticeship through *dietas* continued with other *onanya*, friends of his family, and with an uncle. His mother was a well-known *onanya* and two of his sisters would later learn from her. Nevertheless, it was decided within the family that he would follow another kind of apprenticeship, as that would enable an enrichment and widening of the family's expertise. During this second phase of *dietas*, José deepened his "traditional" apprenticeship while also pursuing his secondary school studies and integrating into an urban lifestyle. In this way, the transition from community life to urban life, and the challenges of "modern" ways of living that the city offered, became part of what inhabited his *dietas*. He learned to understand urban life through his *dietas* which, meanwhile, were also transforming as he was learning to do *dieta* in the city.

As a young man, due to a series of unexpected circumstances, he found himself working for the first time with a group of tourists who

wanted to "take ayahuasca on the Ausangate mountain"[18]. Then he became an assistant for his cousin, an *onanya* and former apprentice of his grandfather, and afterwards he worked regularly with groups of foreigners who were looking for local ayahuasca experts. He refined his work as he sharpened his understanding of why foreigners turned to him, and more generally, what they were looking for within ayahuasca. While he continued with his own *dietas*, he deepened his practice, aiming to respond in the best possible way to what the foreigners brought with them. Little by little, this became his research, both clinical and ethnographic, inhabited by the question of difference and of the difficult asymmetry in power relations. Understanding foreigners on the basis of his *dietas* and of "what he sees within his medicine" underpins his research and therefore also his chants or *ícaros*, that emerge from his *dietas*[19].

My friendship with José's family came after longstanding field research I had been conducting since 2005 in Peru and in Europe, especially in the context of my PhD research in anthropology (2004-2010). The central thread of these experiences was the international expansion of certain Amazonian practices and knowledge related to plants and in particular to ayahuasca. My conversations with José began in Belgium in 2018, three years after getting to know his mother and sisters, who are also *onanya*. The relationship already forged with his family led to us sharing, from the start, domestic spaces, different from those allocated for encounters with their western patients. In this sharing with José's family, I became, little by little, a trusted person, with whom they could stay while they were in Europe, for example, and with whom they could rest from their role as *curanderos*.

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[18] Mountain in the region of Cuzco (6,384 m) very well known on tourist itineraries.

[19] These are very particular chants, which cannot be understood as "songs", or as part of a repertoire that can be learned from another *onanya*. These chants emerge from the learning experience of the dietas and according to the plants the *dieta* is being done with. Coming to understand what these chants are, what they are capable of and how they emerge is complex and this matter returns in various moments throughout the dialogues in this book. The *ícaros* lead the ayahuasca ceremonies, enable a diagnostic process and influence the healing journeys. What can be "seen with the *ícaro*" and what the "*onanya* manages to chant" indicate that these chants crystallize, at the same time, the relationship between the *onanya* and the plants of the *dietas*, and their combined capacity of diagnosing and entering healing processes with patients.

As I was being enriched by the experiences and conversations shared with this family of *onanya*, it became imperative for me to distance myself from a research focus based on "data" and oriented towards the production of a narrative "about" them. Researching now meant letting myself be transformed by the shared experience, learning from what this "domestic" experience demanded of me. At the same time, this encounter was in line with what the *onanya* proposed through their practices: opening oneself up with trust and patience to a dense and complex encounter not only with "their" plants but also with their "medicines", that is to say the way of working that emerged from the entanglement of their *dietas* and the demands of the plants. Consequently, the density of the encounters proposed could not be separated from the rigorous and complex process of learning that these experts had gone through. Realising the importance and the inextricable nature of their learnings heralded an important personal transformation which induced a renewed understanding of their practices, knowledge, plants and plant preparations. It became essential to defocus from substances and rituals in order to slowly approach an experience of familiarization with the human-vegetal entanglement that constituted their persons and their know-how. This was also a period in which I offered my support to people from their international networks who organised trips and retreats, and carried out follow-up activities with their patients. At times as a translator, at times as a cook, I participated behind the scenes in these events. In this way, my friendship was extended to many people who helped them to care for their international patients.

The collaborative approach that underpins this book has taken the form of a convergence between what these *onanya* and their medicine require in terms of relational priority and the possibility of putting all of this into conversation with my scientific community. At the centre: attention was paid to maintaining good relations. This relational ethic affected both the bonds between us and also the way in which I cared for my loved ones and conceived my work as a social scientist and as a professor. This led me to assume a social and ecological responsibility inextricable from the way in which we conceive what "being related" means. The "being related" that emerged from this experience turned relations into what shapes us and sets us in motion over and over again, materially, bodily, collectively and politically.

"Scientific objectivity", understood as a "distance that must not be lost", as a precaution against the danger of "becoming others" or of "turning Indigenous", becomes insufficient and sterile in the face of the possibilities of delving deeper, with our differences and not in spite of them, into a process of co-learning and co-producing knowledge. How can we encourage and welcome the knowledge that arises from our encounter and what our encounter makes important? Feminist epistemologies, such as the "situated knowledges" of Donna Haraway and the "strong objectivity" of Sandra Harding, have insisted on approaching science as practices that are in themselves variegated, that cannot be extracted from the politics of knowledge production and legitimation. This position opens up possibilities for encounter and collaboration to co-construct objectivities from and with the practices of those whom scientific universalism has marginalised or even silenced. This has an impact both on the content of what is studied and on the relationship with what is studied. Here study becomes a co-learning and a "becoming-with". "Caring" becomes a way of celebrating situated truths through practices that are neither "data" nor "practices in context". It is these situated truths, these "objectivities" that, within encounters and through situations, bring forth the worlds whose very existence and importance they defend. In contrast to a relativistic approach that would place all practices on a naïve plane of equality, these feminist approaches defend an epistemic multiplicity in which it is recognized that each situated practice has its own way of "world-making". And "world-making" implies the existence of certain relationships that, when maintained, sustain ways of life, ecosystems, ways of learning and of producing knowledge.

By resituating care, as Haraway proposes, within practices of "politeness", or by anchoring care, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa advocates, in what matters ("matters of care"), the ontologies and cosmologies that are part of our encounter can no longer be treated as "field data". This collaboration instead entails a movement from ontology to epistemology, and from epistemology to the primacy of collaborative practices, embodied in everyday life. Within this movement, narrative efforts pay attention to what practices demand. The importance of practice[20] led me to sense the way in which ontology is first and foremost a pragmatic ethic. And in this matter, because Indigenous knowledge contains ancestral experience of how humans and non-humans can coexist and care within relational and

complex groups or ecologies, this knowledge reveals itself to be highly refined and much further forward than anthropocentric western cultures.

Since 2011, my participation in the eco-feminist collective *"Atelier Souriau"* within the Université Libre in Brussels, has encouraged my search for situated foci and methodologies and a need to transition from cosmologies to "cosmopolitics". This transition includes processes of knowledge production and the political consciousness that arises from shared, or sharable, struggles and from how these struggles can be at the same time perspectives, theories, practices and responses to what compels us (politically) to resist (ontologically). Within the *Healing Encounters* project this cosmopolitical position has been developed in conversation with Indigenous methodologies in the humanities and social sciences, through researchers such as Kim TallBear, Linda Tuwhai Smith, Eve Tuck, Wayne Young, Robin Wall Kimmer, Marisol de la Cadena, among others.

These researchers show how the production of Indigenous knowledge cannot be separated from particular, inter- and intra-relational, politically and historically situated ways of doing and being in the world. They defend the primacy of practice over theory and of respect for relationships over distanced analysis. Through their writings we understand how practices are intersectional agreements, simultaneously robust and fragile, capable of activating and maintaining human and non-human beings, and their worlds. The question of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty over their own knowledge and practices, as well as the possibilities of respecting and honouring this sovereignty, are indispensable here and form part of a wider reflection on the "coloniality of power"[21], inseparable from North-South asymmetrical relationships,

[20] I refer to the notion of "practice" as it appears in the work of Isabelle Stengers, in particular in her writings collected under the title of "cosmopolitics". Through the notion of "ecology of practices", Stengers addresses knowledge production from the perspective of what practices require from those who practice them. Her work reclaims the possible coexistence of different knowledge practices without any of them purporting to be closer to reality; but recognizing in each of them instead those "operative relations" and "restrictions" that enable the production of situated knowledge, above all through what each knowledge "makes matter".

[21] I refer here to the notion of "coloniality of power" developed by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. This notion refers to a particular structuring of power that originated in processes of colonisation, but which has persisted beyond historical colonial times, and has become a form of global domination. This form of domination is structured and maintained by nation-states and by the capitalist economy and is based on colonial categories of race and racial identity reflected in forms of labour exploitation and in the control and production of resources and products within the globalised market.

colonizer-colonized, past and present. In this vein, this book functions as a praxis, in which concepts, foci and methods related to the academic world, serve to enable respect and curiosity for Indigenous concepts, foci and methods. If it feels relevant to me to speak simultaneously about cosmopolitics and Indigenous methodologies, it is because these open up the very possibility that Indigenous men and women who work with plants are part of a dialogue instead of "objects of study".

Thanks to this position it was possible, for José and I, to mutually recognise each other as researchers working in different ways and in our respective situations, on the same matter. José's experience with an international clientele made him into a researcher on the internationalisation of ayahuasca, a researcher whose method follows the procedures of "his medicine", and in particular, the *dieta*. That is how the idea of collaborating progressively emerged, oscillating between shared *dietas* and co-authoring practices, in order to work together in what was, and continues to be, important for both of us: how to talk about Shipibo knowledge in a non-extractive and non-colonial way? How to counteract and even "heal" or "purge" (in a language closer to these medicinal practices) the extractive and colonial dynamics that today inhabit Shipibo practices and their encounters?

Planting seeds: experimentation and shared dieta: "For a collaboration to be aligned, dieta has to be done"

The entry of our collaboration in the *Healing Encounters* project also created the possibility of exploring how the *"dieta"*, the methodological basis of José's practices, could be part of a shared research process. This project, which makes the "encounter" its analytical and methodological starting point, was a space which enabled us to collectivize the search for ethical procedures and forms of social justice rooted in situated scientific research, enabling a questioning of colonialism and extraction. Within this collective we were also able to experiment with the "multiscale" or "multidimensional" research method proposed by Kristin Peterson and

Valerie Olson[22]. This method functions as a "pedagogy of research conceptualisation" that confronts ontologically linear, vertical and hierarchical readings, which limit ways of associating concepts and situations within anthropology. Their use within the Healing Encounters collective supported the rapprochement between ethnographic processes and initiatory processes – both rooted in lived experiences and in a "felt theory". It also enabled the possibility of working with otherness not only on the basis of "ontological" or "epistemic" differences but taking into account instead other ways of "producing concepts" and "practicing theories".

It was fruitful to experience the possible encounters in our research protocols as part of the scientific collective in the *Healing Encounters* project. We were able to look closely at the encounter between the project research ethics and Shipibo ethics related to methods of knowledge production, by engaging in reflections and collective readings on Indigenous methodologies and in conversation with the project members — Pietro Benedito, Isabel De Rose, Emilia Sanabria and Piera Talin. Thanks to the project members diverse encounters were explored which have in common the collective use of ayahuasca: some in which ayahuasca decoctions pass through laboratories, clinical trials, psychedelic studies and therapies; others related to legal struggles over patents and legalization; and finally, within encounters in other Indigenous contexts and also with new emerging "religious" groups, particularly in urban Brazil.

Surrounded by all these encounters, José and I delved into our own, by following José's proposal to do *dieta* together. Without ignoring our situated positions and the power asymmetries at play, we began to experience how to ground our collaboration and transmit it to others. We searched for a good way to honour the ethical integrity that the practice of doing *dieta* demands and the collaborative relationships that this involves.

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[22] Peterson K. Y Olson V., "The Ethnographer's way": A Handbook for Multidimensional Research Design", Duke University Press, 2024.

I went to *Shipibo Rao*, the centre owned by José situated close to Pucallpa, and I started doing *dieta* under his direction in January 2020. At the end of that *dieta*, José and I planned a second *dieta* with the idea of making a merging of our methods happen experimentally: we would record several hours of daily dialogues while we were both doing *dieta*. Moreover, it would not only be his role to give the *dieta*, he himself would do *dieta* at the same time and dedicate himself to the practice of co-writing, an objective requested by José himself. On the one hand, we had planned to invite other Shipibo *onanya* to take part in the same *dieta*, as well as scientists from other disciplines, especially from the medical sector; on the other hand, we had thought about different writing formats that could reach different publics. José clearly expressed a desire to write a book that was aimed towards local Shipibo and non-Shipibo communities, and international networks of patients, of sympathizers of Indigenous medicine (with a focus on ayahuasca), of researchers from different disciplines, interested in this matter. We also discussed the possibility of more specific articles being published on cross-cutting issues in the area of social sciences, in order to bring our collaboration into conversation with my discipline.

Upon my return from the first *dieta*, this idea of a shared *dieta* with invited participants opened up a particular space of discussion and collaboration with the project director, Emilia Sanabria. In the attempt to stay true to the research and ethical possibilities opened up by Indigenous Research Methods, this search for shared methods was formalised through contracts with the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) who administered the funds of the que ERC project. José was thus recognised and remunerated as a "scientific collaborator" and as an ethical adviser to the project. At the same time that Emilia and I were arranging the administrative side of this singular idea of collaborative research, we felt the need to deepen our understanding of how it would be possible to do anthropological research while following and respecting the methodological demands of an *onanya*. In line with José's proposal: "for a collaboration to be aligned, *dieta* has to be done", and with the aim of blending our collaboration into the project's collective dynamic, it was decided that Emilia Sanabria would also participate in the shared *dieta* and would be part of our recorded conversations. However, the arrival of Covid radically limited our invitations, due to both questions of travel

restrictions and administrative requirements. While we were organising the shared dieta, it began taking on a different configuration. Instead of inviting other *onanya* to participate in the conversations, José decided to share this *dieta* with members of his own family: his wife and mother of his daughter, Allison Michell Vásquez Sánchez, and his sister-in-law, Amy Vásquez Sánchez. For both women, this was to be their first *dieta*. And for both, this became an opportunity to share their perspectives as mestiza women who had recently become involved in the *Shipibo Rao* healing centre. Another Shipibo *onanya* accompanied the *dieta* but without participating in the recorded conversations: his function was to look after all of us who were doing *dieta* as well as those other people, external to the project, who were doing *dieta* in *Shipibo Rao* at the same time.

When we arrived at *Shipibo Rao* to start the shared *dieta,* Emilia and I realised that this project of *dieta* held some significant questions: José did not know how the plants would react and if this would give rise to something favourable. It was the first time that he had done *dieta* himself while also giving *dieta* to other people. The integration of spaces for conversation within the *dieta* process was also highly experimental.

The conversations we had were polyphonic, intermittent, and animated, and this polyphony was partly lost in the decision to write a book in the form of alternating questions and answers. Just like in the final edit of a film, the soundtrack and the voice overs help us to experience or discover the overall sense, the intros and notes aim to do the same for this book. On the other hand, it was not possible to portray in the composition of this book the numerous back-and-forth discussions that enabled us to collectively find the "the right words" to say what had to be said. After this *dieta*, a process of consultation began on the structure of the book. Although the recorded conversations, which were then transcribed, served as the basis for the composition of the book, the work of classifying, assembling, cutting and editing enabled the oral word to be transformed into written text, and at the same time meant that the collaboration process, full of zigzags and repetitions, continued to be at work. The selection of themes and sequences matched our methodological choices and the ground that had been prepared by our previous discussions, during the non-recorded conversations. Conversing within a *dieta* and struggling together to find the right words, underlined the importance of

what it means to frame a *dieta* and follow it through until the end. This practice also highlighted the need to redesign the way in which words, expressions and ways of speaking inhabit a *dieta*.

After the dialogues were recorded during the *dieta*, José and I continued working on particular themes, in different moments and contexts, at times recorded, at times not. Three days of supplementary recorded conversations took place in France and included the presence of Allison Vásquez Sánchez and Emilia Sanabria. These additional layers enabled a reworking of the written text and implied a change to the structure of the book. What guided us in this highly experimental practice were the conceptual themes and encounters that we had been building over time, had started to systematize at the end of the first *dieta* and had returned to discussing afterwards. This whole choreography of comings and goings meant that the writing was established collaboratively from a shared sense of what it was absolutely necessary to say with respect to the vitally important issues that appear and require action within the different communities involved in this collaboration.

In the process that drove this book, José's efforts and my own coincided in favouring processes of co-learning, or to say it in a language more recognisable to scientists, processes of "knowledge production". In this convergence between research and learning, Emilia Sanabria and I have taken great care to avoid giving science the role of "validating" what José proposes. On the contrary, we have, instead, experienced together how practices of scientific research and practices of Indigenous research can meet and work together.

Crystallizing encounters, *dietas* and relationships into written words and into sequential themes that lead to a book implies a complex movement where something that has multiple forms, something that functions like a constant sprouting up of leaves, seeds, flowers, branches and whole trees, adapts into a kind of linear form. This introduction will now continue with an attempt to show some of the processes that have given form to this book, both in its contents, because they inhabited the dialogues, and in its structure, because they have rooted the book's meaning.

Among the processes that have rooted this book: bulto, war, trauma and brujería

By way of example, and to provide a window into the kind of dynamics that have rooted this co-writing and have structured the book, let us stay with the description that José makes of a particular kind of illness: "the *Bulto*" (Chapter 4). For him, this is an illness that his medicine is capable of healing while other types of medicine do not manage to treat it or even "see it". He describes it as "a type of trauma". For José, the term "trauma" encapsulates the illnesses of the majority of his foreign clients and is the reason they turn to him in search of help. The use of this term is, therefore, rooted in his experience with this type of clients and reveals the dialogical character of his diagnosis. José has loaded the term "trauma" with the understanding that emerges from his practice and has adapted it to his medicine. Indeed, he distinguishes several types of trauma, which are detailed in the dialogues in this book.

Speaking of trauma enables José to work with difference. Some traumas are, he says, "typically gringo". Without making the term an exclusive prerogative of foreigners, this formulation allows him to relate to his current patients and at the same time make his medicine accessible and workable for them. José speaks of the tendency to "always want more, rapidly and easily", a trauma that leads to "consuming" constantly and insatiably, or a "trauma of the ego" that turns arrogance and a lack of humanity into a defence mechanism and a way of dominating other people. This situated difference, encapsulated by the word "trauma", is a difference that runs through bodies and inhabits them in the same way that it runs through and inhabits peoples and societies. In part, his diagnosis converts trauma into a kind of "Indigenous critique" of non-Indigenous society[23].

[23] I am thinking here of the analysis by David Graeber and David Wengrow of "Indigenous critique" with respect to the "myth of progress" in the second chapter of their book "The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity". The authors situate the presence and impact of Indigenous critique since the first moments of colonization as an intercultural and political conversation with a fundamental impact on the structuring (whether in terms of influence or resistance) of "modern" thought. "For European audiences, the Indigenous critique would come as a shock to the system, revealing possibilities for human emancipation that, once disclosed, could hardly be ignored. Indeed, the ideas expressed in that critique came to be perceived as such a menace to the fabric of European society that an entire body of theory was called into being, specifically to refute them. As we will shortly see, the whole story we summarized in the last chapter – our standard historical meta-narrative about the ambivalent progress of human civilization, where freedoms are lost as societies grow bigger and more complex – was invented largely for the purpose of neutralizing the threat of Indigenous critique" (chap.2 – 1285: Kindle).

His point of view on "modern society" is expressed through different images that we will find throughout the dialogues. One of these images is that of intensively farmed chickens. According to José, modern society turns us into chickens who live life imprisoned, under a lightbulb and fed with drugs[24]. This analogy has many elements in common with the theories of some feminist researchers, in particular with regards to the devastating colonial monoculture that defines what they call "Plantationocene"[25]. This policy of large-scale profitability captures humans and non-humans transforming them into human, vegetable, animal and mineral resources, according to instrumentalist, unilateral relationships. Everything is done so that possible spaces for relational negotiation are deprived of unexpected and transformative encounters. Any uprising is cut down at the roots. The medicine that José proposes is, therefore, an opportunity to transform oneself by weaving and honouring relationships of care, or relationships that heal. In this way, José draws us an image of a medicine in which illness and distress, as well as "errors", are certainly *"pruebas"*, but are above all opportunities to learn and transform. Healing is rooted in the possibilities that these processes entail. José describes a medicine that requires time; a path that has to be experienced through many processes. And this path is composed of risks and uncertainties because nothing can be programmed beforehand, and everything is inextricable and simultaneously relational, familial,

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[24] A note on the affinity between the image used by José and Donna Haraway's work in "When Species Meet", namely chapter 10: "Chicken". The author offers an analysis of how chickens have been recruited by different systems of wealth production and commercial exchange, including the way in which the image of the chicken is used in sexist language. She details the forms and consequences of the mass, industrial and global production of chickens: forced growth, confinement, "miraculous" medicines (antibiotics and hormones), proliferation of illnesses (including those transmissible to humans), killing on a grand scale and chicken contraband. "Follow the chicken and find the world ", she writes at the end of her analysis, which aims to rethink asymmetrical and utilitarian relationships, without excluding them but instead inviting the possibilities a collaborative "becoming with".

[25] I am referring in particular to the work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and her theorisation of the figure of the "plantation" as a systematic act of land grabbing, of transforming beings and ways of life into resources, both human and non-human; and of the transformation of (bio) diversity into monoculture. All of this for the creation of profit in the form of cumulative and scalable capital. Her works include: "Friction. An ethnography of global connection " (Princeton University Press, 2005) and " The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins" (Princeton University Press, 2015).

territorial and intimate. This vision of what medicine can be, is also, therefore, an ecology: an ecology of beings, relationships, affects and practices. In this ecology, people never stop being relational nodes and the ethnographic focus becomes a cartography of every person's changing territories. Inwardness and relational coherence join here in a profoundly pragmatic vision that questions beings, situations and relationships on the basis of what they become capable of doing, feeling and becoming together.

From José's point of view, "typically gringo traumas" are collective, social and contemporary realities that he knows first-hand, not only because he treats them, but also because he faces them in his daily life as an urban Shipibo. Trapped by technologies and modern relational dynamics, he faces the challenges of commodification, efficiency, consumption and extraction, especially with regards to his own medicine and knowledge. He is also a witness to the speed and ease with which biomedicine eliminates symptoms, contrary to what is involved in the processes of *dietas* that demand experiencing difficulties in order to learn from them.

José's work with a particular type of trauma, namely "intergenerational" trauma, enabled a process that I will narrate here, as an invitation to readers into one of the many encounters that are behind and between the lines of this book. Intergenerational trauma is like a "*bulto*", explains José, which is something that a person carries with them, inside, as though it was attached or stuck, and which destroys them from within (Chapter 4). It is not the result of a trauma experienced in one's own life but rather comes from the family line. This particular facet of the *bulto* led us to depths which, for José, intertwine his learning through the *dietas* and his concerns as a healer. And for me, reverberated with the need to rethink my way of associating the practice of doing *dieta* and the scientific community to which I belong.

Together, we worked on the *bulto*. I had been working on mine in retreats and *dietas*, healing intergenerational traumas linked to the violence of the Second World War. This experience had a strong effect and led me to give great importance to the often-silent functioning of these "intergenerational harms", as well as to the processes of attention that they require. At the same time, for some years now, José had been

dedicating himself to a particular kind of work: designing *dietas* and giving *dieta* to war veterans[26].

Our processes and dialogues related to the traumas of war had started in our first *dieta* and continued in the second. This led us to explore more deeply what "protection" is, how it works and how we relate differently to it.

In the second *dieta*, José announced to me that the question of protection was something which I needed to work on. José asked the plant that I was going to do *dieta* with, to teach me about protection and asked for me to receive more protection. Because of this, part of the dialogues recorded were guided by this intention. During the *dieta*, we questioned together the protective value of certain practices: practices that, when cultivated, would serve as protection. From this work emerged the importance of differentiating protection that arises from practices of mutual care and protection that functions like an army protecting a border. This difference was accompanied by an idea: "what is perceived and experienced as protection, gives a certain shape to a collective, to a society". A "civilised" being, or a "civilisation", could, in this sense, be reconsidered on the basis of how their protections work. However, what does it mean to protect? What is the difference between protecting like a warrior, like a soldier or like an *onanya*? *Onanya* often talk about the importance of protecting a medicinal space, of protecting a ceremonial circle, of protecting a *dieta* or a medicinal work, or of putting a protection, "the *arcana*", onto people and onto their *dietas*. What does it mean to be protected by an arcana? How does an *arcana* protect? The "mothers of the plants", *Ibo* and *Yoshin*, are also described as "protectors", "guardians". The Shipibo terms *Ibo* and *Yoshin*, sometimes translated as "owners" (sometimes as "mothers") of the plants, led us to a debate on the

[26] We will return to the presence of veterans among José's patients during the conversations, especially in chapter 9. Among the veteran associations that are looking for healing with ayahuasca and/or with the help of traditional curanderos, see, for example: https://www.heroicheartsproject.org/. Their presence in international ayahuasca networks has a particular impact on clinical research into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and, in a more general way, into the links that exist today between "traditional Indigenous medicine " and the treatment of trauma. On the clinical and pharmacological approach of this question, see, for example: Jessica L. Nielson y Julie D. Megler 2014: "Ayahuasca as a Candid Therapy for PTSD" in B. Labate y C. Cavnar: "The Therapeutic use of Ayahuasca", Springer; and Antonio Inserra, 2018. 'The Psychedelic Ayahuasca Heals Traumatic Memories via a Sigma1 Receptor-Mediated Epigenetic-Mnemonic Process' in Frontiers of Pharmacology, vol. 9.

relationship between protection and ownership. Perhaps too frequently, these Shipibo terms are also abundantly translated by the generic term "plant spirits" in anthropological and non-anthropological literature, which gives a "religious" or even "transcendent" accent to beings that are experienced by the *onanya* as family members and are inextricably entangled with the very materiality of the plants and of the world. These "protectors" or "guardians" are not only part of plants, but also of animals, forest areas and parts of rivers, especially where water accumulates. River pools usually have a mother.

Questioning what a "spirit" is seems like an effective way to follow the thread of protections. However, it calls for more than an analytical answer, the important thing being to learn to sense those mothers, guardians, and from there to understand how they behave and what they are capable of. Moreover, "learning to work with plants" means learning to sense what a plant wants, what it can do and what it needs to do it. Our conversations revolved around the pragmatics and materiality of those mothers: how plants inhabit and contribute to bodies, to transformational processes and to collaborative networks. The guardians are invisible yet material. It is possible to communicate with them even though they do not speak in "human" language. Learning to sense and to recognise them, in the body, in the mind and in daily life, learning to distinguish between what comes from them - guardians, plants or mothers – and what comes from oneself, lies at the centre of what the *dietas* bring into motion. This discernment is a complex and subtle art which requires a great deal of training. If the encounter is a communication, it happens in such a way that each person has to discover and to train for a considerable period of time.

Nevertheless, it is a common idea for patients and apprentices that taking ayahuasca means "talking with plants", and that the *dieta* consists of "connecting with a plant", *"as though it was a plug socket"*, José tells us with a smile. We will see in the book how José expands and redesigns this highly common image of "connection" (Chapter 8) and also the idea that the plants can bring or show their own autonomous "intention". The plants do not have "intentions" independent from the *onanya* with whom they are collaborating, José explains. On the contrary, it is essential to understand how the plants "give *pruebas*" and how these

pruebas are the very way in which plants "communicate" with those who look for them and according to how they find them.

The subject of protections also took us into the complex and controversial topic of *brujería*. For José, *brujería* attacks are reminiscent of what locals do, or can do, with the skills and alliances they acquire through plant *dietas*. So, from a certain point of view, *brujería* is something "local". At the same time, José explains that "healing gringos" is often similar, or requires the same skills, to when one faces and wants to free a person from *brujería*. What does this imply? For foreign audiences, this often causes discomfort. Pointing out a *brujo's* intention to harm, or that same intention in someone employing a *brujo* to do harm, as the cause of an illness or misfortune, is often perceived by foreign clients as something very "exotic". According to José's experience, some centres managed by foreigners in the Amazon region ask the *onanya* they employ to avoid speaking about *brujería* with foreign clients. They justify this precaution by saying that foreigners "don't think like that" or "don't understand illness in that way". In terms of the local context, José tells us that this is in fact something very present in communities and, in his understanding, the importance and the role *brujería* has taken in the local context is strongly linked to colonisation, evangelisation and the competitive relations that accompany social inequalities and the commodification of resources (Chapters 3, 5 and 6). This *brujería*, simultaneously imported and typically local, is inextricable from coloniality and the discriminations that coloniality nourishes.

However, *brujería "as he sees it with the medicine"*[27] introduces an additional factor. Firstly, it must be taken into account that what he "sees with the medicine" – or what "the plants show him" thanks to his *dietas* – has formed part of his way of looking, feeling and being in the world from a very early age and, therefore, is an integral part of his perception and vision of the world in general. Secondly, in his role as an *onanya*, to see with the medicine means to act as a healer. Therefore, seeing with the medicine means having access to how to act in order to offer help.

[27] This refers to his capacity "to see with the plants", that is to say, from his *dietas* and during the ayahuasca ceremonies.

This is where the question of *brujería*, of protection and of trauma become entangled: "active" intergenerational traumas, or "*bultos*", explains José, and *brujería* attacks manifest themselves "in the medicine (vision)"- in the same way. Both "act" in the same way. And both demand the same type of skills and the same healing processes. As he relates in Chapter 4, the "active *bultos*", in the same way as works of *brujería*, have a "guardian" who attacks everything in the vicinity, does not let anyone enter and thereby protects a territory in which it sows destruction.

The conversation that enabled us to put our finger on this convergence between traumas and *brujerías* took place in Europe in the summer of 2022, just one week after visiting, upon José's request, what remains of a concentration camp from the Second World War in Belgium[28]. Visiting a concentration camp formed part of his research and his wish to understand war traumas more deeply, including mine. José uses the image of the concentration camp to describe how *brujería* and active trauma function in the same way "within the medicine". The form of a concentration camp, of a *brujería* attack and of a still active intergenerational trauma, coalesce into an image with a pragmatic value[29]: the figure of a protection in the form of a wall that creates an interior territory closely guarded where the power of coercion and destruction is at the same time total inside and invisible from the outside.

Healing the *bulto* is for José a work of long and difficult cleaning, however it is simply a work of "mere cleaning". If the *curandero* tries to enter the *bulto* to look at its origin, he can stay stuck, trapped by that very *bulto*. He could feel attacked by the guardian of the *bulto* and could react by counterattacking. Within the work of "cleaning the *bulto*", José explains, the healer wins by treating the harm without attacking the guardian and without looking for the details of what caused it. Otherwise, the *curandero* can be morally impacted by the facts that created that *bulto*. If that happens, says José, the *curandero* could become incapable of using the impartial judgement that every patient needs to receive attention.

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[28] https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_de_Breendonk.

[29] I understand the term "pragmatic image" as an image that shows what it does, that crystallizes the way in which something works or functions and that enables us to think about how to respond to it. These images with pragmatic value could also be similar to Isabelle Stengers' "operating concepts": concepts constituted by what they demand of those who use them.

According to José, understanding this pragmatic and operative connection between bulto and *brujería* opens up the possibility, as a *curandero*, of finding ways to respond other than to counterattack, which would be typical of "combat between *brujos*". In part, avoiding counterattack responds to the different origin of these harms: one historical, the other intertwined in synchronous hostile social relations. But beyond the difference in origin, this stance enables him to think of a type of harm that is at the same time historical and synchronous, individual and collective, personal and shared. His response to that harm—both intergenerational trauma and *brujería*—goes beyond the designation of a perpetrator and opens up a space for medicine that is a space of justice beyond judgment, where all *bultos* can be managed and simply cleaned up.

Thinking, healing and writing in entangled images

This experience of methodological and conceptual co-construction enabled me to understand the importance of thinking on the basis of "figures" or "images", as a way of theorising not only what comes out of practice, but what connects the work of the *curandero* with his communicative and collaborative experience with the plants. This is because these images arise in processes during which experiences, practices and relations, especially between humans and non-humans, crosscut and inform each other mutually. At times they are "vegetal" images used to talk about humans (bodies without roots, beings like plants that don't manage to grow or yield fruits, people who have droopy leaves …), other times they are images that crystallise the functioning of the harms that affect people and the processes they need in order to heal (in this case the active *bulto* that acts like a *brujería* and that defends a space of destruction like a concentration camp).

This book tries to capture this multidimensional and processual language, staying as close as possible to common experiences and aiming to address the most diverse audiences possible. For José, reflecting on language is a way of continuing to work on the articulation between what he calls the "old" and the "modern". The old *onanya* and *meraya* spoke little, José tells us. When they spoke, they said many things, important

things, using few words. And often, when they spoke, what they said was not understood because they spent most of the time doing *dieta*, in the forest, and in communication with the beings that inhabit it. They spoke "like the plants", José says, beyond words and tongues. The disappearance of the *meraya* and the current challenges faced by the *onanya* (due to their detractors and also to those who look for them and value them but from a commercial standpoint) poses the question of the loss of a particular way of speaking and using language.

I have opted to follow José into this area of linguistic discomfort, which at the same time carries the memory of an exclusively oral and sylvatic Shipibo language. As a consequence, the Shipibo words used by José are presented in the book according to the way he uses them and the meaning he attributes to them. On rare occasions, a footnote gives the meaning that the Loriot, Lauriault and Day dictionary attributes to the word. This has been the case in this introduction for the terms *onanya* and *meraya*. However, this dictionary, that is widely used today in Peru, is the product of a massive campaign of evangelisation, sedentarisation and hispanisation for the Shipibo, carried out by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a highly controversial evangelical organisation from the United States, often accused of being fundamentalist and imperialist, and even accused of sterilisation campaigns with Indigenous women and aggressive literacy and evangelization campaigns towards children. The penetration of this organisation into Shipibo territories has had a definitive impact on the devaluation and transformation of their Indigenous way of life since the 1940s and until recent times when the Ministry of Education assumed what is today called Bilingual Intercultural Education (*Educación Intercultural Bilingüe* - EIB). However, since the arrival of the *Summer Institute of Linguistics*, the Shipibo language has become a written language, studied in parallel to Spanish, in the best of cases, but always subordinate and secondary to the national language. For that reason, we have decided to avoid modifying or translating the Shipibo words mentioned by José according to linguistic or anthropological sources, as though it was a question of finding a better translation or an original version. Instead, we stay with José's uncertainties regarding what to call this or that; with his comings and goings between Shipibo and Spanish and with his way of understanding what comes from outside, what is

transformed and what has been preserved[30]. From David Abram's perspective[31], language itself, ways of speaking and writing, all carry forms of "animation": they animate certain types of relationships and silence others. These transformations are not "innocent" but rather divisionary and partial. In the work of turning oral narration into written sequencing, José's way of speaking has been maintained, although at times this might be difficult to access for someone who is not familiar with him. Some of the footnotes attempt to accompany the reader in the case of some perhaps more enigmatic expressions or images.

Among ruined landscapes and untamed borders, how can we allow ourselves to be "civilized", and therefore "protected", by the convergence of the practices of care transmitted by José and by the practices of care that Indigenous and feminist epistemologies contribute to research? Isabelle Stengers, in this regard, questioning the tie between "modern civilization" and the hegemony that certain knowledge production apparatus exercise over others, warns against the destruction of what she calls "generative apparatus": *"Modern civilization has worked for the destruction of apparatuses cultivated by peoples for whom language was not reduced to a tool for intentionally communicating what we mean to say. Instead, language participated in the fabrication of always precarious worlds, ceaselessly reprised"*.[32] In this generative world making ("precarious" because in intra-dependence with others) learning, knowledge production and healing trajectories can be combined in a "figure" that is simultaneously a "sense making", "feeling making" and "motif making".[33] A figure where the guardians of totalitarian and destructive, traumatic or haunted spaces can be cleaned by practices that use other ways of being guardians and of having guardians. "Protecting with mothers" paints a different picture than that of an attack, a war, or the protection of a border, and is instead an entangled becoming, vulnerable but intensely alive.

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[30] Further reflection on the challenges of translating this book into English can be found in the Translators' Glossary, co-authored with Joanne Hutchinson.

[31] David Abram, 2013. "The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World", Vintage Books Editions, 1997.

[32] Stengers, Isabelle. 2023 "Reactivating Sense in Common. A Reading of Whitehead in Times of Collapse", Posthumanities, University of Minnesota Press, p.172.

[33] Stengers, Isabelle. Ibid., p. 175.

DIALOGUES

José López Sánchez

* *Editor's note:* to facilitate reading we have decided to use italics for the voice asking the questions



Chapter 1

Ayahuascaine

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Ayahuascaine

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"The plants are the doctors. If this is the hospital, the plants are the surgeons" 67

Introduction to "Ayahuascaine"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

This first chapter opens with a contrast in perspective, as we consider the way in which people and mindsets foreign to the Shipibo world (and in many cases foreign to the Indigenous world) have become interested in ayahuasca and how they are using it. This landscape sketched out by José describes the risks of using an ayahuasca "without a mother". As Shipibo *onanya* are tirelessly telling us, "plants have mothers". Yet how can this affirmation be understood? Learning that plants can have mothers obliges us to challenge ways of thinking about what plants are, what a mother is and what this implies or demands.

It could be possible to understand "plants having mothers" as plants having spirits, that the *onanya* work with the spirits of the plants and that they are defending the importance of these spirits. While not untrue, this idea reduces "having mothers" to a cosmological, cultural, spiritual or religious concept, separate or "separable" from the "material" plants and from the practices that the plants require. Put another way, separating the plants from their mothers questions the idea of separating the material from the spiritual, bodies from stories, the chemical components of plants as studied by biologists from lived and embodied experience. Materiality is not "simply material", it is wider, "alive", in the sense that it is impossible to separate life and matter. If we take seriously what José defines as an "extraction", or what reduces ayahuasca to a "simple thing", then we are confronted with the ease and lack of respect with which plants are extracted from their living environments and from the traditional practices which care for them.

Plants have mothers, but ayahuasca – which is a decoction of at least two plants – also has a mother. Having a mother does not therefore only correspond to what could be understood as a biologically living being, like a plant for example. A decoction, which openly challenges the common understanding of what can be "alive", also has a mother. Neither should having a mother be understood as a metaphor or a belief. The way in which José talks about ayahuasca's mother shows us how this mother obliges us, what she demands and how she protects. This is a pragmatic way of speaking and an educational stance which makes us question our preconceived ideas. If we see José's propositions as beliefs or metaphors, this could prevent us from being educated by his explanations, it could stop us from experiencing the demands, the invitations and the "living" character of these healing practices.

The phrase "an ayahuasca with a mother" becomes synonymous with a "living" ayahuasca. José introduces us to an ayahuasca which acts as a being who takes you to her world and makes you look at yourself, in your world, from her world. Using this kind of encounter as a starting point, José describes *dietas*[34] as the practice that enables a deepening of what has been "seen" through ayahuasca, namely seeing oneself from this another being's perspective.

The *dietas* could be described as periods in which to experiment with possible encounters with certain plants as well as with the methods, effects and consequences of these encounters. In this first chapter the *dietas* are understood as occasions to deeply experience what certain plants and their mothers can share with us about ourselves. Ayahuasca appears here as plants which can, perhaps, open up this possibility, and the *dieta* as the practice which enables us to engage in deeper work around this possibility. Each *dieta* is dedicated to a particular plant, and the plants which form the *dieta* are different to ayahuasca. However, it is during

[34] Translators' note: We have chosen not to translate the word *dieta* in this book, as the English word "diet" in English feels too reductionist to encapsulate this practice. As in the case of *icaros*, discussions on understanding the practice of *dieta* run throughout the book. In local Spanish, the word translates the Shipibo practice *sama*. It is the main practice for learning and, especially in contemporary configurations, also for healing.

these *dietas* that the possibility of ayahuasca's effectiveness is "planted", as José expresses it, is "rooted". Whether ayahuasca is prepared well depends on the *dietas* of those who prepare her; her effectiveness during a ceremony also depends on the *dietas* of those who share it and those who lead the space with their songs. The *icaros*, medicinal songs chanted by the *onanya* to support healing, also emerge from the *dietas*[35]. However, the *dietas* are open and risky processes; their results cannot be planned, as this is an encounter, and the terms and effects of these relational possibilities are revealed little by little, as a person follows their *dieta*. The role of the *onanya* who "gives the *dieta*" to other people is to guide and accompany these processes. But the *onanya* cannot determine the outcome of these processes either.

The *dietas* appear, in this first chapter, as open trajectories, as spaces framed by the *onanya* in such a way that healing "emerges". Healing is not, therefore, to be confused with the effect of the plants understood as "ingested substances" or as "active molecules" but as something which emerges from the relationships a person builds with plants by doing *dieta*.

In order to have a good relationship with the plants and their mothers it is necessary to learn how to show them respect and how to behave without betraying the trust that the plants place in their human allies. The restrictions that have to be followed during the *dietas* are there to show respect towards the plants. The plants, José tells us, are the doctors, while the *onanya* are the guides, the patients' accompaniers, the "support intermediaries", but the healing emerges from the relationship created with the plants. Based on this reciprocal

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[35] Translators' note: Understanding what *ícaros* are and which practices they entangle is an important theme that is discussed throughout the book. We have decided not to translate *ícaros* as "songs" because of their specificity and we have chosen to translate the verb *"icarear"* as "chanting *ícaros*" in order, again to distinguish this practice from the common idea of "singing". "*Icarado/a*" also exists, as an adjective, indicating something that has received an *ícaro*. These are very particular chants, which cannot be understood as "songs", or as part of a repertoire that can be learned from another *onanya*. These chants emerge from the learning experience of the *dietas* and according to the plants the *dieta* is being done with. Coming to understand what these chants are, what they are capable of and how they emerge is complex and this matter returns in various moments throughout the dialogues in this book.

recognition, particular care is required for the harvesting of the plants needed to cook ayahuasca, and the people and methods used to cook them and administer them to others. This care is a relational art which in part comes from ancestral traditions and in part from the personal experience of each *onanya* according to their *dietas*.

When a plant is extracted, separated from her mother, she becomes dark, violent, to the point of converting herself into something important to question: an "ayahuasca without a mother". The journey that ayahuasca takes when respect for her mother becomes fragile, opens up questions about the progressive distancing of the *dietas* from "how *dietas* used to be". On the one hand, doing *dieta* can teach us how to confront the new illnesses and new challenges in society. On the other hand, modernity also appears as another way to impose certain behaviours and mentalities, which José terms as "gringo", and which can compromise the very possibility of continuing to work with the plants and their mothers. The idea of a "pharmaceutical spirit" substituting "the mother" and transforming ayahuasca into what José terms "ayahuascaine", positions this transformation as an extraction and an epistemicide, which *"kills us, but in another way"*. Using the metaphor of ayahuascaine - which creates an analogy with the transformation of coca into cocaine - José invites us to look at and question the way in which a "medicine" can be transformed into a "drug" and what the difference is between the two.

"Ayahuasca has a mother"

Let's start by talking about what is happening with Ayahuasca internationally, especially the pharmaceutical interpretation of what ayahuasca is and what it could become. Many current clinical trials are extracting ayahuasca from its ritual processes and from Indigenous healers; they are experimenting with the possibility of supplying ayahuasca in pill form, according to a chemical understanding of its potential effectiveness. At the same time, many people are also going to the Peruvian Amazon in search of ayahuasca. Many of these

people believe that it is ayahuasca that cures and that it cures alone, perhaps because it is difficult to understand the dieta *processes, the trust you must have in the beings guiding those processes, the importance of how ayahuasca is prepared and everything that goes beyond the cooking down of the plants and the ceremonies themselves. Few people have had the opportunity of listening to a* curandero/a *putting into perspective what is happening nowadays regarding their ancestral healing traditions.*

The problem is that ayahuasca[36] has a mother. And the pharmaceutical procedures that produce a simple pill, a simple "thing", make ayahuasca lose his purpose and meaning, and because of this he will not work without his mother. For ayahuasca to work (transformed into pills) I think they will have to add some chemical substances that will of course turn her into something different. Because if someone does not prepare ayahuasca well, she will never have the same strength as she does here in the forest, when she is prepared well. If someone cooks her without the necessary care, if they burn her for example, she will not give you *mareación*[37], she will punish you. And if after this experience you go to a ceremony and take ayahuasca that has been well prepared, the ayahuasca will ask you the very question "why have you burned me?"

What if someone has never been able to take "good" ayahuasca, if they have only experienced badly prepared ayahuasca?

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[36] José sometimes refers to ayahuasca as male and sometimes female. We have respected this specific way of speaking, although the literature commonly refers to ayahuasca as female. See Glossary for the English Edition.

[37] Translators' note: This refers, as a verb, as a noun or as an adjective, to the effect resulting from the ingestion of ayahuasca or some other plants. We could have translated it as "altered state", "dizziness", "drunkenness", "sickness" or "vertigo". None of these translations would have carried the way in which the *mareación/mareo* functions as a space of medical research and healing action for the *onanya*. We have therefore kept the Spanish.

My grandfather used to tell me, "you'll see, in the future, before I die, ayahuasca won't be ayahuasca anymore, she will become ayahuascaine". And this is exactly what is happening today! And now I think, "that crazy elder was right when he said she would become ayahuascaine". But true ayahuasca – with her spirit, essence, strength, and the secret methods by which we prepare her, how we blow *soplo*[38] on her, how we "put an intention" upon her, that is another thing altogether.

Ayahuasca makes you see things that might be good or bad; she shows you ancestral and personal traumas. If you have committed a great error in your life, sometimes ayahuasca punishes you and makes you reflect. She does not always make you experience things that make you go "wow!" like you might see on the internet, where it says that ayahuasca makes you see colours, lights, that she will make you find your "true self". That is why I think that what they are producing in laboratories with ayahuasca will instead be used to control minds. Because when ayahuasca is prepared well she does not control your mind, instead she makes you see the shit that exists in your mind, and she makes you open up your heart. Ayahuasca will take you to the point at which you will see your reality, the way in which you manage your daily life, where and how you are internally. She will also show you who you are, your way of being. When you are in an ayahuasca ceremony, you are seeing yourself, feeling yourself; you know that something is wrong. No matter how much you would like to make it right, you still don't feel good. And once you have been through the process, you may feel free, you may feel strong, you may feel calm, but the ayahuasca will have shown you your internal self. When you wake up, however, you could decide to return to your daily life and continue as before. As my grandfather used to say, "ayahuasca has made you see, she has made you feel, it is your problem if you want to keep living in the same way".

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[38] Translators' note: *"Soplar"*, the practice of blowing upon a person, a plant or an object has profound meanings. It can imply a form of cleaning, or it can accompany the chanting of an *arcana* and therefore the way in which an arcana is put upon someone. It requires the same skills as chanting. The "*soplo*", the "blowing" carries the *dietas* and therefore the knowhow, just as the *icaros* do. Therefore, we have chosen this translation to transmit the idea of "blowing breath" in English while also maintaining the specificity of the concept of *"soplo"* and what it implies. "Also see "*arcana*" in the Translators' « glossary ».

Nowadays we are really disconnected from our hearts. I believe that ayahuasca takes you to the point of knowing who you are, where you are going, why you came to this world, and what your vision of life is. Ayahuasca shows. First, she takes you to her world and then she shows you your world. And this isn't a sort of spiritualism at all. She takes you there abruptly. That is why many people call her "grandmother", because she might say to you, "come on, let's go!" and if you want to – because it's your decision – you can try to sort your life out and live according to the world that the plants showed you. But it is really difficult. Why do foreigners come to the forest to take part in a *dieta*, why do they want to take part in a *dieta*? Because ayahuasca has already shown them something about themselves. And the only way that their world can change (into what ayahuasca has shown them) is through doing *dieta*. I guess this is why foreigners come to do *dietas*.

"How they continue to kill us, but in a different way"

What do you think now about your grandfather's message about ayahuascaine? Does this message make you compare old ways and modern ways?

If I compare old ways to modern ways, I go no further than comparison. That doesn't speak of experience, or living an experience, because when you live it, you realise that the old ways and modern ways have the same aim, but they have developed in different ways; that is to say, the difference lies in what has been developed in the past and in modern times. Modern science looks at human beings as though they were engines. An engine has a cylinder, liquid, all the parts that enable it to function. We could also see a human being in that way: by investigating the components that enable them to function as though they were a machine, a robot. And that is how modernity has developed machines, has developed human beings as though they were machines, as though modern people were their creators. That is why I say they are killing

so much. And they also continue to kill us here, but in a different way.

The elders from past times would say "at some time in the future bats with big wings are going to come, with five mouths of fire and there will be no more fish in the rivers or animals to hunt". They used to talk about these things. Every time I take ayahuasca I remember this. And looking at modern times and past times I think that what they were saying has become reality now. That is why, back then, *maestros*[39] or *meraya*[40], were afraid of "the race" (they called all white men and women "the gringo race"). And for that very reason they forbid the sharing of knowledge or wisdom with them, because they said that "the gringos" would modernise it. And that is exactly what has happened. It is a shame that they now want to obtain, with their scientific world and with chemicals, what we still have left: our medicine and above all ayahuasca. They want to turn her into powder and give her out as pills; this fills us with great sadness. I wouldn't want my daughter or son to take ayahuasca as a powder, as though she was a tea. Because she would no longer have her essence. They would actually be selling ayahuasca as if she was a drug.

Ayahuasca is prepared with a full *dieta*[41] and there is a process for her very preparation: you have to know at which moment she must be prepared, how to extract the plants that will be cooked together for the ayahuasca, what time to do it, whether there is a full moon, who is going to prepare her[42]. If ayahuasca is

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[39] Translators' note: *Maestro/a* translates literally as "teacher". It is often used as synonym for *onanya* or *curandero/a*. It is a very common way of addressing the *onanya* in the local context.

[40] Translators' note: The *meraya* are Shipibo plant experts, known for having a higher level of knowledge and initiation than the *onanya*. It is necessary to receive the *dietas* of a *meraya* to become one. It is often said that the *meraya* have disappeared in current times. José translates *meraya* as "the one who finds".

[41] After doing a *dieta* dedicated to preparing the plants.

[42] There are different recipes for the preparation of ayahuasca. The two basic ingredients for Shipibo ayahuasca, *Oni* in the Shipibo language, are a vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and a bush (*Chacruna viridis*).

prepared with respect, she will turn out really well, but if she is only prepared out of obligation (prepared for example because people are paying money) she will not be good: she will be brusque, violent. There are many ways to prepare and to care for the medicine, but nowadays, foreigners want to change these ways. They have put the *maestros* and their medicine chants into retreat programs, and they want to tell them how to chant, when to chant, even at what time they should chant. The gringos want to run things, but they run things as though the medicine was a business. That is the "gringo" mind which does not know this tradition and lacks respect for those who do know about it.

Nowadays, as healing processes have to become programs, many *maestros* do the work that is asked of them, they comply and receive money. This does not enable the real work to be done. That is why many people have bad experiences, and they say "What? This is ayahuasca? It doesn't work then!" … "it's a drug and it has made me feel worse!"

But if a *maestro*, instead of submitting himself to following a program, allows himself to be led by what the plants tell him, then that person will open up their whole being, right to their roots, to their essence. That is why I sometimes ask myself, why does the owner of a centre, who doesn't follow a *dieta*, or have years of experience, want to change our science, this Indigenous science, this plant science?" For example, there are foreign owners of centres and lodges who tell you that you should only chant to each patient for three minutes! And that is how you start to realise that foreigners might come here and think that they are *curanderos*[43]. They want to

[43] Translators' note: Although this term is often translated as "healer", we have chosen not to translate it, as it is already a translation of the Shipibo terms *onanya* or *yobe*, which are much wider in meaning. Translating the complexity of the Indigenous plant experts' know-how into exclusively "medical" or "healing" terms is already problematic. Furthermore, the term *curandero* is a colonial term that carries colonial context and history. It carries the problematic translation of Indigenous authority figures into colonial language as well as into a political context of devaluation and silencing of Indigenous knowledge and ways of life. The Spanish term "*curandero*" refers to an

tell you how to be a *curandero*, a well programmed one. This is how they are killing us. But also, how we are allowing it to happen, because of this economy. Because sometimes it is easier to chant and take the money. A *curandero* who just chants and takes ayahuasca no longer wants to do *chacra*[44] work or go fishing. It's as if they could just eat money. This is how they continue to kill us. How we are allowing ourselves to be invaded by their ambitions, by their egos which want to tell us how to supposedly improve our *curandero* practice.

The word ayahuascaine makes us think of cocaine, do you see similarities in these two examples of how plants used traditionally by Indigenous people have been transformed? I have heard people from the Andes say that the coca plant has two sides, like the two sides of its leaves: one side is greener and shinier, and the other side is greyer and opaquer; that the spirit of coca also has a light side and a shadow side. But they also said that cocaine was not even the dark side of coca, but another spirit altogether, that perhaps the plant's mother has gone, and another spirit has come in her place?

Exactly. This is the spirit of modernisation and pharma-chemists: they study the plants, and they determine that they contain I don't know what and I don't know how much of it. DMT[45] in the case of ayahuasca, for example. But the plants don't work in this way, this turns them into something artificial.

And do artificial things have spirits?

"unofficial healer", even a "charlatan", as opposed to "doctors", officially designated by imported institutions (academies of medicine and medical associations defining the "legal" exercise of medicinal practice). These institutions sought and obtained unprecedented widespread legitimacy both in Europe and the Americas during the colonial period. Nevertheless, the term "*curandero/a*" is used today by Indigenous *onanya* to define themselves. Keeping it in Spanish when used by Jose meant for us staying with the complexity of this colonial background without "translating it away" through the English term "healer".

[44] Chakra work refers to agricultural work.

[45] Dimethyltryptamine: a molecule recognised as being psychoactive in the biochemistry of *Chacruna Viridis*, one of the two plants that together make up the basic ingredients of the decoction known as ayahuasca.

No, they don't have spirits. They have to be alive to have a mother. To work well she's got to be alive, like a human being. The human mind is very creative, it can create a thousand things in one moment: it can create love, or war, or a swimming pool, right here, right now. But by extracting the elements of ayahuasca and transforming them into something artificial, it all disappears. For example, look what happened to the famous *uña de gato* plant[46]? Everyone said "*uña de gato* cures cancer". Why? Because, to my understanding, there were *curanderos* who often practiced this type of healing against cancer. I am referring to energetic *curanderos* who knew about the struggles of the dark and the light, *curanderos* who are experts in the medicine and how to prepare it. That does not mean that a scientist, a doctor, or a medic (who studies in their way, using other theory and technique) is going to do the same thing as the *curandero*. A different knowledge exists for each one of them. The *naturista* doctor, that is "nature-based" as we say in the Amazon, did not graduate from a university, nevertheless, he heals. Naturism, as we understand it in the Amazon, means that this man learned what he knows in a particular way. The *naturista* doctor knows how to extract the plant from the first moment of his intention; he knows why he is harvesting that plant, and in what moment to harvest her. That is why, in the *dietas*, it is vital to master your dreams, mind and words. Because the quality of your *dieta* is what enables you to understand how to approach the plant and when, how to harvest her and how the plant can heal.

"It is no longer about killing; it is about transforming until it no longer exists"

*As we have discussed, you are running a project, your own healing centre (*Shipibo Rao*), which aims to be a bridge between very different time frames, between the world of programmed retreats and* dietas *and this way of practising*

[46] A vine. Latin name: *Uncaria tomentosa*.

and healing that you are sharing with us. Different ways of relating to time, of living with time: on the one hand, the dates of the trips, program logistics, and results, and on the other hand the time frame of a practise which cannot be programmed, which can only be lived and discovered. You have said many times: "I am in the middle and I feel it physically".

I think that the world of money, of commercialisation, the world of machines and of programming has annihilated this kind of method, this kind of practice, firstly in Europe. Many people were killed precisely for trying to defend this kind of knowledge. They burned many women who knew about plants and ways of healing. This continues nowadays, although the way it is done has been transformed; I am referring to the way in which a practice is eradicated. It is no longer about killing; It is about transforming until it no longer exists. They continue to kill us now, here in Latin America, but in a different way. It is not about burning people in their homes, nor in Europe either. They do it in a more intelligent way. It is about annihilating our knowledge. And that is how we will end up with ayahuascaine. It is knowledge we must defend. In the future, even Indigenous people will modernise and take ayahuascaine. Many Indigenous people have already modernised.

What often happens when a foreigner learns this? (And I have seen this many times!) After a while they start to say "ah! I'll prepare ayahuasca, I'll do it. If the work is just about preparing wood, this and that … I'll do it". That is the gringo mentality. In reality, even to do that part, you have to train someone to prepare the plants well. Because preparing ayahuasca holds many secrets. Much dedication. If a *maestro* who cooks the medicine in *Shipibo Rao* gets drunk, for example, or goes into the city and arrives after being with a woman, the ayahuasca comes out really badly. She loses her strength. It's a disaster: she becomes brusque, dark, violent, but when she is prepared well, with his *dieta*, ayahuasca might even taste lovely! So, there are a lot of different aspects. And often a foreigner thinks they know. They study how she is made

scientifically, they learn that ayahuasca has DMT, you know, those things they say, that the *chacruna* plant has this, that it could be this or that, and they start to ask "what if we grind ayahuasca down? And what if we grind *chacruna* down into a powder?" In other words, they want to globalise her in any way they can. They want to change her form; they want to change the way we prepare her without thinking about the consequences that these modifications could have further down the line. And above all, without respecting the *curandero*, who, poor soul, has followed a *dieta* for so many years to do this work and someone simply comes here and says to him, "you know what? This should be done differently". And the *curandero* accepts because the foreigner helps him with money. *Maestros* and *maestras* are suffering because they have to vomit during the ceremony, but they don't do it, because according to foreign owners that run centres or lodges, the *curandero* shouldn't vomit any more. Because foreigners think that the *curandero* should be a "pure" person, who "no longer vomits", who "no longer has anything to clear out". On the contrary, purging[47] with plants is part of the healing for everyone, always. What is more, the *curandero* vomits what he removes and aligns[48] from the patients and from those who are following a *dieta*[49] and above all from those who cross the *dietas*[50]. But according to the gringo mentality the *curandero* is a person who has to be "pure", who

[47] Translators' note: Synonym for "cleaning" and therefore "healing", see Glossary.

[48] Translators' note: Within the conversation in chapter 9, we discuss the difficulty of translating this word, which is used as both a noun and an adjective. Even though it entails the idea of a "line", this image doesn't seem to fit with what José intends to express. It is rather connected with the idea of things, thoughts, feelings, people and situations fitting well together. It is about being in a pattern of movement that is favourable. A *curandero* can chant in order to *"alinear"*, to make things fit again, to entangle them properly, to have them flowing within a common movement.

[49] Vomiting is common during ayahuasca ceremonies. Sometimes during the *dietas*, vomiting can occur without being directly related to the "ingestion" of ayahuasca or other plants. Vomiting is understood as a cleansing practice, directed by the plants and/or by the *onanya's* medicine songs. José is referring here to the fact that everyone constantly has things that the plants can clean, and that the curanderos/as use the act of vomiting to help their patients with their cleaning processes during the ceremonies.

[50] We will talk later in detail about "crossing a *dieta*". For now it is important to clarify that crossing a *dieta* occurs when a person does not respect the food or behavioural restrictions set for a *dieta*: generally these restrictions involve not eating salt or sugar, not eating pork or red meat, not drinking alcohol or taking any other kind of drug or plants other than those ordered by the people who "give the *dieta*", not engaging in any kind of sexual activity and avoiding conflicts or arguments with other people.

never drinks coca cola, never eats pizza, who only eats vegetables. So many *curanderos* are there holding in vomit, so that foreigners don't say "that *curandero* is vomiting as well? Just like us?"

However, what foreigners bring is not all bad. They have taught me to work with, receive, and understand westerners; how to understand their experiences: what they come with and what they are expecting. And it can be a good thing to manage the staff, to be punctual: if you say eight on the dot, you mean eight on the dot. If lunch is at twelve, then twelve it is. On the administrative side they are really good. That is missing for many of us. But it's another thing to bring this same order, this rigidity of programming, to the work we do. Because gringos very quickly think they are the *curandero*, they are the *maestro*: the one who runs everything and does everything.

"They think that I am going to teach but I am just the guide"

There is something really contradictory in the way a gringo tends to relate to a maestro. *On one hand, they believe that the* maestro *is a pure and perfect being, and on the other hand, they have a lack of respect for what is important to the* maestro, *especially when it is different to the gringo's expectations.*

Someone who was my student wrote to me three days ago, saying

"*Maestro*! I don't really trust you because I've been doing *dieta* for a year and a half and I'm still only just beginning to chant"[51].

[51] Gaining the capacity to chant through a *dieta*, or "receiving the medicinal chants (*icaros*) from the plants" during the *dietas* is considered to be a sign of a certain level of learning, corresponding to the possibility of leading an ayahuasca ceremonial space and the capacity to help others. José will speak in detail about these medicinal chants in different parts of this book.

I answered him "I don't want to say much but let me ask you this: during a year and a half of doing *dieta*, how many times have you crossed it?"[52]

"Four times", he told me.

"Well then, you are repeating the year".

"I want to do *dieta*" he told me, "for one month, but don't charge me much money. I will do *dieta* with you but not in a relationship of trust. It won't be like it was, I don't trust you now".

Well, if he doesn't trust me, it's better he doesn't come at all. The problem with saying "I want to do *dieta*, but I don't trust you" is that he is not just talking about trusting me but also about trusting the plants and trusting his own behaviour. This way of thinking seems really crazy to me. They think that I am going to teach them, but I am just the guide. If they are behaving badly, well, I can try to guide them by saying "do this instead". And if they can't find, I can help them to find[53]. I am not the guardian of the forest; I can't teach them as if I were the *shihuahuaco*[54]; I am a human being just like any other. That is what the gringo doesn't understand. They think that they can control the learning process with their things. My dad used to say, "that's what they pay us for, to take care of them". This way of programming, ordering, is how machines work. And that is never going to replace knowledge. They are never going to be able to create that.

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[52] Refers to "crossing a *dieta*" see Glossary.

[53] Translators' note: The transitive verb "to find" requires an object, an "it". In English as well as in Spanish. Yet José leaves this open-ended because what needs to be found is not known in advance. Finding means here, at the same time, finding out what needs to be found and finding "it". Or rather, finding out what was needed to be found by finding it.

[54] Tree. *Dipteryx micrantha*.

Are you saying that what they are trying to do is define knowledge in another way so that people accept the idea that "functioning like a machine is knowledge"? Do you know that they are now making computer applications for mental health? The application says to you "Hello José, how are you today? Are you depressed?... Between 8 and 5? How are you today between 1 and 10? And it is artificial intelligence which says to you "I think it would be good for you now to breathe a little and go for a walk…" it is a machine that takes care of you on your mobile phone, using an algorithm. Some people think that they can use these applications for therapeutic care after a session with psychedelics.

Well, this is a trick. It is programmed to respond in a predetermined way to the question. It is like them teaching my daughter at school to respond to questions and so she learns that and repeats it back to me. Machines are programmed like this. But if she responds with authenticity, with her way of seeing and thinking, with deeper knowledge, she will respond to me in a different way. This is acquiring knowledge and not just learning what they teach you. These two things are very different. You replying to me by repeating what they taught you, or you replying to me according to what you have learned.

I have often had differences with the students of an American professor who studies the plants that we work with. All of their questions, and their answers too, are what the professor says. When they gave me these answers I responded differently altogether, according to my understanding; simple but true things. That is why the answers given by the elders were different each time. Not only among the Shipibo people. I have seen, by participating in different encounters, that it is the same among *maestros* and *maestras* from Colombia, for example. The answer seems insignificant at times, but it is always true.

"From the elders´ answers you can draw many fruits. They feed you with their words"

How do the elders respond?

With a word or a short sentence. They speak little. Very little. With three words they have told you everything. With two words you already know what it is they want to say. And it is really meaningful, important: it means something. From their answers you can draw many fruits. They feed you with their words. It is like a different language. I lack the knowledge to express the feeling or the language.

To lose this would be a terrible shame. It would be good if children were in touch with this language, if they could learn to communicate in this way. Ayahuasca, like any medicine, has a lot of knowledge, she has much more wisdom than a machine. Because knowledge opens up each day; you learn more every day. Like you are exploring … and that's how it goes.

"The plants are the doctors. If this the hospital, the plants are the surgeons"

You talk to us about plants who have a mother, all these plants that you have done dieta *with and that work with you, how do they appear when you work with them in an ayahuasca ceremony?*

When we chant, when we are in a ceremony, if you chant this plant to the person who is following the *dieta*, it is as though she arrives, it is like you call her and she comes. That is to say, when you can manage your vision well, it is as if she comes and is by your

side, like she wraps a shawl over you, like a chant... it is like she blows air on you. You can see clearly how she is dressed and how she does her work.

And then she leaves and something else comes. If they are chanting and for example the issue is about harmonizing the mind of someone who has experienced a loss, someone who is sad, it is like they come with this rhythm, like dancing, like wanting to cheer them up. And often, in that moment some people are struggling, others are vomiting[55] and when she leaves it is like you feel this joy, like you breathe and you feel alive, like this satisfaction comes, this peacefulness, this wellbeing. Because they come and they take away all the negatives and when they go, that is when you feel relieved.

The plants are the doctors. If this is the hospital, they are the surgeons and we are the support intermediaries. We have learned, yes, but we are human beings, we make our mistakes, we have our feelings. We are a means; we are a bridge to open all of that up. We are also doctors, but it is the plants that heal.

And this word *"maestro"* is very grand. Too grand maybe. "Master builders" would be better. In every medicinal chant, I don't know if you have noticed, the words *"meraya"* and *"onanya"* appear[56], because we are calling to the spirit, the plant doctor, that is what the names *onanya* and *meraya* refer to. Because that is where these words come from. And it is from there that the *curanderos* get their names. I think that giving a person the name *onanya* or *meray*a is very sacred. Yet nowadays Indigenous society is being marketed. But whenever an *ícaro* is born it is an *onanya* or a *meraya*, because they are in reality the different energies of the plants. We, on the other hand, are the ones who take care of each patient.

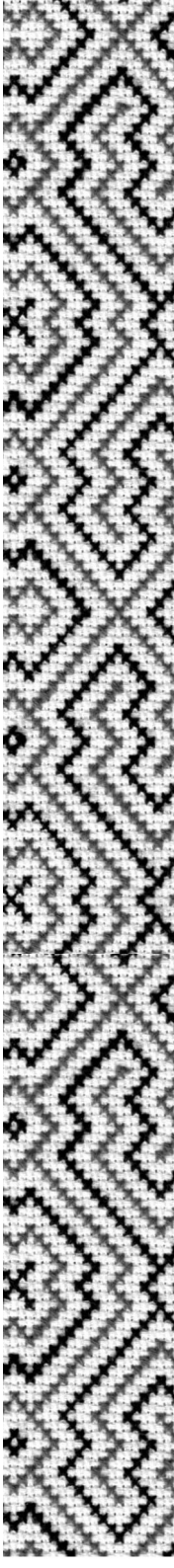
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[55] José is referring here to peoples' lived experience during the ceremony: to be struggling with something difficult and / or to be vomiting, that is to say, "cleaning oneself" according to the processes induced by this type of medicine.

[56] For the definition of *onanya* and *meraya* see the glossary.

Chapter 2

Alive knowledge



Chapter 2

Alive knowledge

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Introduction
"Alive knowledge"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

How does a person gain knowledge? In this chapter, José focuses on the difference between learning through one´s own experience – like an imprint left by something that has been lived– and learning from another person's teachings, repeating their knowledge through imitation. José only recognises the former as knowledge, while he sees the latter as a "trick" played by machines programmed to respond to certain questions in a particular way. This differentiation challenges our ways of thinking in general about learning within the university and school system. It also offers a specific perspective on current developments in artificial intelligence and the questions emerging from that.

For José, as a *curandero*, learning from lived experience, "*drawing from your own knowledge*", implies feeling the patients' sufferings in his own body, in his thoughts, in his dreams and in his daily life situations. It is "*living at that moment, the life of others*". José offers this kind of openness and sensory availability. This is an intrinsic part of his learning, in which he places himself at the service of others' healing processes. This implies something highly radical. The *curandero* recognises how to help another person because he has to help himself first, from within the experience of the other person's suffering. At the same time, he has to learn to discern what is his and what belongs to the other person. Healing therefore implies participating in another person's process, helping them to clean what needs to be cleaned, through himself and without judging the other. "Judgement" appears to be something which impedes the helping of others, and which causes the *curandero* to get "stuck" in the other's suffering instead of working for their liberation. In this chapter, we delve into the complexity of

the concept and technique of "cleaning" within Shipibo traditional medicine, including bodily cleaning, relational cleaning and cleaning ways of living. These cleaning processes challenge concepts of bodies as individual and separate entities. The suffering which José explains he feels in his body and in his life, and this shared embodiment with his patients, calls on us to understand knowledge differently and to consider from where an act of healing might emerge.

Today this knowledge is at risk. And the commercial framework within which encounters take place between *onanya* and their international patients, is part of this risk. Both the expectations and the commercial mentality of the patients as well as the reaction of the *onanya* to the socio-economic asymmetry in which these encounters take place, require attention and precaution. A commercial mentality leads to treating the *dietas* and the plants as things which are consumed, over and over again. At the same time, modern temporal and programmatic demands expect the healing and learning offered by Shipibo medicine to give guaranteed results within a predetermined time frame.

In this chapter José challenges some of the current attitudes of foreigners who journey to the Amazon region in search of ayahuasca, using the figures of the "supermarket" and the "bar". These figures exemplify the behaviour of "medicine consumers". José questions here the importance of "taking ayahuasca" and the effects (or *mareación*) that can be felt afterwards. He contrasts the perseverance required by healing processes with this consumer behaviour.

José's use of the "supermarket" and "hospital" leads the dialogues to the important issue of "addiction" as well as to academic forms of learning. He is concerned about traditional practices being turned into "forms of addiction" and the challenge of learning being reduced to something that functions "like academic training". These reflections and concepts emerge from the years that José has spent studying his patients. He remembers that being a *curandero* used to be part of a collective way of life, in

which it was the elders who recognised and monitored an *onanya's* work. The traditional evaluation by elders of these emerging processes, is now being substituted for evaluation by client-patients, which could pose a significant threat, especially when this new clientele wants to dictate the results and the time frame for these results. The very competence of the *onanya*, which was traditionally not guaranteed as it was constantly being submitted to new trials and was monitored by the elders, could today be evaluated according to a purely commercial framework.

"Emerging" processes are fundamental within José's healing and learning practices. The absence of guarantees in results and of a predetermined time frame, are the preserves of a kind of healing that "emerges", and of a kind of "alive knowledge" which "emanates" from an experience which is both personal and relational, shared with others, and especially with the plants.

"We have to suffer it all in order to heal it"

Talk to us about this "alive" knowledge which opens up day by day through experience and respectful collaboration with the plants, which you distinguish from learning by repeating what another person says.

In a *curandero's* daily life, knowledge works in this way: suddenly things happen to you and that's when you know what the other person needs. If the other person is living with a cancerous pain or another type of illness, the *curandero* feels it and knows how to recognize it: he knows how to distinguish where this energy is coming from, where this pain is coming from. But he also knows it is not his. If you have family problems, or work problems, or fear, or *susto*[57], the *curandero* feels this and knows that he normally

[57] As an etiological category, this word indicates a cause of illness or misfortune. It is quite common among mestizo healing practices and diagnostics. Literally, it indicates a "shock", an experience of severe fear, and also the ongoing consequences of this past "shock". It can sometimes be related to the term "trauma" as well.

doesn't feel this way. Suddenly, fear and family problems present themselves in his life. That is how the *curandero* knows what kind of problem the person is looking for help with; that is how the *curandero* diagnoses. He first has to go through it himself, he has to feel it and live it, to see and know what is happening with the other person. And then he goes to look for the plants.

Sometimes, and this is really difficult to understand, if an alcoholic comes, for example, the *curandero* gets an urge to drink alcohol. If a drug addict comes, thoughts appear in the *curandero's* mind: "I wonder what drugs are like? Do I want to try them?" and then friends come who offer him drugs or invite him to try them. There will be times that he actually tries them and other times not. Sometimes these kinds of *pruebas*[58] appear before the person arrives who is looking for help and the *curandero* has to go through it, through the lived experience of each person who comes. Through this process, the *curandero* starts searching and takes the medicine to see where this comes from[59]. Many patients come with a curiosity to see if the *curandero* knows or doesn't know. Maybe 1 or 2 percent come with trust and 98 or 99 percent arrive with mistrust. Even if they say, "he is a good *maestro*", mistrust is always high. And many people tell you hardly anything, others tell you too much, and the *curandero* has to work on that too. Starting from what he himself is experiencing from this person. And that guides him on how to find the right plant. It is different for scientific doctors; they close their

[58] Translators' note: The word *prueba* could be translated as "test" but we chose to keep it in Spanish. It stands for an important concept within Jose's theorization of traditional medicine. Healing and learning means traversing these "tests", these *pruebas*. It entails being put to the test by plants but also embracing the test as a healing and learning opportunity. It also means becoming capable of recognizing what a *prueba* is, when and how it manifests in one's life.

[59] José is referring here to taking ayahuasca as a means of diagnosis. Traditionally, José will explain, only *onanya* took ayahuasca regularly. Giving ayahuasca to patients was a possibility, but it was not commonplace. The ritual design which has become prevalent today in which groups of twenty or more people take ayahuasca repeatedly with one or more *curanderos/as* is more recent and is related to the understanding of ayahuasca as a "remedy" in itself. It is important to understand how the "mestizo" use of ayahuasca, influenced by the colonial impact in the western Amazon region, was an important stage in the progressive medicalization of traditional Indigenous practices and more specifically in the importance given to ayahuasca and its shared and ritualistic use for healing purposes. One reference book on this issue is the classic text by Michael Taussig: "Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Men. A Study in Terror and Healing", Chicago University Press, 1987.

clinic and goodbye; they do not try to feel in their body, live in their own flesh what is happening to their patient; they do not get involved in this world of sensing. However, that is how the traditional *curandero* diagnoses; even if the person does not want to tell him because of shame or fear of what might happen. That is how the *curandero* knows which plant to use and what he needs to look for. And this search is also a payment, it is an offering, in the same way that doing *dieta* is an offering[60]. It means leaving your house at 5 in the morning before your wife and child wake up, before anyone else sees you. And you have to go out into the forest if you want to discover a new plant, not the plants which already have scientific names, and which are well known. So, what the *curandero* does is track and search using his dreams. He has to go through a period, for example, of a week or five days, where he feels and lives what the other person is carrying.

Learning to heal, to help, while maintaining distances is part of learning in the bio-medical professions and also in social work. They learn empathy, but up to a certain point, precisely so that it doesn't affect them.

Chemistry and books help to maintain a strong mind, in order not to feel; instead, a *curandero* is very sensitive. Even more so if he has a daughter, mother, son, father. Because a *curandero* feels, during these processes, as though it is his father who is suffering, or his daughter. He carries the suffering. That is the difference. He needs a lot of internal strength, a lot of intention, a lot of heart, a strong mind and so on, to have the strength to do this work.

Isn't that really dangerous for the curandero?

[60] José is referring here to the *dieta* as dry fasting (daily periods which can extend to three consecutive days) during which the person taking part in the *dieta* cannot eat, drink liquids or touch water. In the *dietas* given by José, fasting also precludes the use of soaps or shampoo. Fasting, as José will explain later in this book, is an offering made to the plants, a proof of effort, respect and dedication made by a person to be able to "work with the plants". Fasting is also explained as a cleaning practice enabling bodies to change their odours and compositions so that they can become hosts of plants being "planted" in their bodies by the practice of *dieta*.

A *curandero's* life is not easy. That is why on some days I want to teach my son this work and on other days I don't. The stories I know about the old *curanderos*… the majority of the good *curanderos* suffered the loss of their mother when they were very young; others come from very humble backgrounds. Some were abandoned, others saw their mother die in front of them; others were rejected by their mother, and some were born with someone wanting to kill them. Many are no longer alive, most of the strong *curanderos* who learned well and have now died, had really sad and difficult lives. So, I think that they learn more deeply with the strength that they draw from that. They have lived with more feeling, with more sensitivity, with greater impetus, with more strength. This is now changing, there are even *curanderos* who only learn so they can work in the lodges: they just learn to give the gringo what the gringo asks for. I think that the life of a true *curandero* is full of suffering. That is where the strength comes from. And at the same time that is the difficult part, that is what I don't like about this work: having to live, at a particular moment, the life of others.

I have often thought about just giving talks, or of opening a lodge like a businessman and not as a *curandero*, of putting *curanderos* to work, with me as the manager, so that I don't have to feel and experience this all the time, because whether you like it or not, that is where you have to go. I often have headaches, backaches. Uncomfortable feelings in my body, heaviness. It would be lovely to only feel what is mine, but that isn't how it works.

Isn't there an alternative to this?

No, there isn't. You have to go through this. You have to feel it so that you can recognise, understand, why this person has come looking for you and how you can heal them. And if I don't take ayahuasca, I might live with this for a month, a week, or a fortnight[61].

[61] Here we again find a reference to the need for *curanderos* to take ayahuasca to clean themselves, to purge themselves, especially to remove their patients' suffering from their bodies.

Do you take ayahuasca to clean yourself of this? Even though you know it isn't yours, does it stick to you anyway?

Even though I know, it still sticks to me and I have to clean myself. By looking for someone who can clean me[62] or by taking the medicine myself. But there are moments that you don't even want to take the medicine.

Do you chant to yourself?

Yes. The first *ícaros* that I chant during a ceremony are for me. I have to clean myself of bad words I have spoken, bad thoughts that I have had, thoughts that have worried me, when I felt afraid, or it might be angry energy that I had with my wife, with my daughter or son, or with another person, with a worker, or with other people I have reacted badly with. In other words, everything that we have to clean, that in the Shipibo language we call *ucha shinan*: dark thoughts. After cleaning that, I then start to chant one by one, to the patients. That is what the first medicinal chants are for, to sort out all my thoughts, my own or the patients' crossed *dietas*, if I was in *dieta* and I ate in a restaurant and I got served some pork[63] or something else I shouldn't be eating. I clean that by burping, and very occasionally by vomiting. That is how I clean my thoughts, my words and my dreams. Then, when I feel sure again, I start chanting to the patients. That is why I often try to be alone on the day of the ceremony, peacefully, concentrating on what is going to happen that night.

When you are in front of another person, "entering with your ícaro*" as you say, how do you distinguish whether what you feel is yours or if it belongs to the other person?*

When I become what I am not; for example, I feel fear, and I know it is not mine.

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[62] A *curandero/a* can ask for help from another *curandero/a* to "clean" him/her with his/her chanting and/or by taking ayahuasca together.

[63] Pork is one of the most common restrictions and crossing a *dieta* by eating pork is considered a serious crossing of a *dieta*.

What do you think of the idea that curanderos *are wounded people who have overcome their wounds and who, because they have done that, can help others to overcome their wounds?*

That is exactly right. But that does not mean that you are pure, that you don't feel jealousy or envy. Simply that you have the power to help others. Nobody knows how much the *maestros* and *maestras* have suffered to know what they know. Psychologists, doctors, biologists, scientists, they come here and they have read about the theory or they look at what the *curandero* does and they think "ah, I know how to improve this tradition and adapt it for travellers!, because the travellers, or patients, come from a modern city and they won't like the way that things are done here, so we'd better do things differently; I will design things differently". But they are going against our knowledge and against the wisdom of our elders. That mentality is a lack of respect and an invasion.

Today, in many lodges in the Amazon region, not just in Peru, they treat the elders badly because they lack respect for the knowledge of each and every *curandero*, because it is a different kind of knowledge to the kind they have. They do not know how much a *maestro* or *maestra* has suffered to be able to chant. Because the *ícaros* do not come to you just like that; they are not songs they play on the radio, that you can listen to and learn. An *ícaro* is something that nobody can teach you because there is no teacher to teach you, because the teachers are the plants and the plants are invisible and you do *dietas*, for years and years and, finally, according to what you manage to experience, the *ícaro* emerges. And you need a lot of patience to be able to learn this. You can't say "I am going to Boston University, and you know what? I have money, I'm the President of Peru's son, I can pay, and I want to be a doctor", that is to say, that because I pay the University, the teacher has to teach me. It doesn't work like that here, there is no price. The only price is interest, discipline and patience. I believe this is what is most important. Everything you have to suffer as a *curandero*; you experience illness, hunger, poverty, all kinds of things. While you are doing *dieta*, your son, wife, or mother might become ill. And while you are doing *dieta* you can't do anything, no matter

how much you would like to, because if you do, you are crossing the *dieta*[64], and bye-bye *dieta*! You do what you should not be doing, and it turns bad, and when you do what you shouldn't, in three months you'll be ill in bed.

I am doing *dieta* right now with you, invited by you, and I was saying to my sister-in-law "'wow! How lovely that I have eaten while in *dieta* today, and it was served at 12 o'clock"[65] but it wasn't like that before, when I was doing *dietas* as a young man, I couldn't eat because we didn't have anything to eat. Today at least, thanks to you, I have lunch and breakfast. Now I am not doing a *dieta* thinking "what am I going to eat tomorrow?". In this regard, it is easier to be doing a *dieta* now. Before they would say "off you go, and if you want a *dieta*, this is how it is and if not, then not". Now the modern *dietas* are "luxury *dietas*" with restaurants! The gringos who come to do a *dieta* don't want bad food and mosquitos; so, they are transforming things so that it is more comfortable. The risk is that, over time, the work itself might not be good anymore. It might become like drug addiction; something that you consume, consume, and consume. It is like when a doctor gives you a treatment for something specific and you extend its use, then it becomes drug addiction.

"There are no limits or time frames to learning with a plant"

The encounter between onanya *medicine and a foreign public within a commercial framework is a wide-ranging and complex topic. You have explained the way in which the commercialisation of the* dietas *can lead to a kind of addiction. How can this be prevented? What needs to be understood about your medicine, so it is not treated like something to "consume"?*

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[64] Reference to the possibility of "crossing", or "breaking the learning process". See also "crossed *dieta*" in the glossary.

[65] José is referring here to the second *dieta* process, during which he was doing a *dieta*, together with his wife, his sister-in-law, Emilia Sanabria and myself. In parallel, another *onanya*, Don Francisco, was caring for us and others who were doing *dietas*. See also the explanations in the introduction to this book, and in the epilogue, about this process of shared *dieta*.

There are many ways of doing *dieta*. For example, if a foreigner does *dieta*, after *dieta*, after *dieta*, it is because they want to learn something, they want to get somewhere with it, but there are dynamics involved where people might follow many *dietas* and still come out disappointed. There are misunderstandings around what doing *dieta* means and how to position yourself within that. And this leads to broken relationships and people speaking badly about us and our world. On the one hand, there are now *maestros* who give *dieta* for the money. All over the Amazon region we are accustomed to saying to people "I will teach you" but we want to function like a university, we want to be "modern" by saying "I will teach you in six years … in six years you will be a *curandero*". And the worst error is saying to someone "in one year you will be a *curandero*" because there is no predetermined time frame to becoming a *curandero*; it is an individual discipline, it depends on how one processes learning, on how each person learns. These teachings cannot be implemented in a program.

Another problem occurs when the *maestros* who give *dieta* to foreigners do not want "a gringo to learn", because they know that when a gringo learns, they will want to do and will have the opportunity to do a thousand things in their country; that is to say, he or she will have opportunities that the *maestros* here in the Amazon region don't have and never will. In these cases, the *maestros* give *dieta*, but at the end of the *dieta* they remove the energy that comes from the *dieta*. Other *maestros* only give *dieta* "from their breath", that is to say, from their own knowledge but without connecting the *dieta* directly to the plants. I have seen foreigners who have done *dietas* for years and years and they don't even have one *ícaro*, they don't have the strength. They have only learned what is superficial: how a *curandero* does the ceremony, how he prepares ayahuasca, etc. but what we aspire to here is strength. And strength comes from your own knowledge, not the *maestro's*. Because each one of us has our way of thinking, of being, our character, our way of living, way of walking, of smiling, of eating, etc. And so, when you learn directly from the plant, from the tree, from the guidance of a *maestro*, you draw your own knowledge. That knowledge is yours and nobody can take it away

from you. You carry that knowledge with you until the end of your life, until your body rests. This is true learning. The *maestro* feeds you with his strength, that is true, but the one who is learning has to find their own strength.

To give an example, let's think about a person who gets depressed because of a word, a look, a gesture, and has to take antidepressant pills. After working with the plants and the *ícaros*, that person will have a different way of reacting in these situations. The plants and the *ícaros* help; when difficult things happen to this person they will no longer fall into a well, they will no longer drown in a glass of water. When confronted with any kind of adversity, they will get up, they will stand up. It is like in summer, at the beach or at the edge of a pool, and there is a little tree with lots of flowers, beautiful, but then the rain comes or high tide, water currents, and they knock down what was lovely, her flowers and her beauty. But when the tree is already strong, currents can come, rain and tree trunks, the water can lower and rise up. It ebbs and it flows, but the tree never falls down; that is to say, your own learning is what gives you mental strength, and energetic, physical and spiritual strength as well. Something negative happens to you and you don't move towards hatred, you don't fall into a hole without a way out; instead, you accept life, you accept what has to be. And you keep walking on; you carry on along your path. That is what this work does.

You are talking about knowledge that does not exist without the plants and their requirements, and also without the maestros *who are guides. But at the same time, you explain that this has to come from each person's knowledge and strength, as the result of a learning process that you cannot know beforehand and that cannot be programmed. Why is it so difficult for gringos to understand this?*

A gringo sees this as a study. If you are an anthropologist, you will also want to learn philosophy; from philosophy you will want to learn psychology and from psychology you turn to mathematics. But this world doesn't work in that way. The most important point here is the respect for a master plant. It is from her that you learn. And if you are an *ayahuasquero*, you will always be

an *ayahuasquero*[66]. Or if you are a *san pedrero*, you will always be a *san pedrero*[67]. That doesn't mean that you are not going to mix things, that you are not going to try things or experiment. So if I am an *ayahuasquero* and I have a friend who is a *san pedrero* and I want to approach that, I go to him as a patient, as a guest, but I would never then come back and combine *san pedro* with ayahuasca among my people or say that I am also a *san pedrero*, because there are no limits and no timeframes to learning with a plant. It is about dedication. Instead, the gringo mentality sees this as research, as a study. The more you accumulate, the better. Instead of deepening the respect necessary for this kind of apprenticeship, they accumulate types of plants and traditions. That is what they are accustomed to. There are people who have three professions, others study education and then they become politicians. In other words, this mentality of bettering yourself professionally, and without the commitment of respecting a plant. What is more, often they do not merely want to learn, they long to become "something more", to have more titles, as with university degrees. But it doesn't work like that in this field. Here learning means going deeper, it means understanding. Here there are no titles. You cannot get your *ayahuasquero* certificate. Nobody can say to you "now you are a *maestro*, here is your authentic *maestro* certificate".

"In the past it was the elders who gave permission for a person to heal others"

Nowadays, there are attempts to formalise curandero *practice through "official titles" – with the aim of putting right the abuses of people who are*

[66] Translators' note: Somebody who knows how to work with ayahuasca, within either the Indigenous or the mestizo context of the Amazon region. Sometimes used as synonym to *"maestro/a", "curandero/a"* and with the Shipibo terms "*Onanya/Meraya/Yobe*".

[67] José refers here to the "San Pedro" cactus or *Uachuma* in the Quechua language, which is also part of South American Indigenous forms of medicine (very present in Peru), and which has experienced a significant internationalisation, parallel to ayahuasca. José is referring here to the "gringo" tendency to move from one plant to another or to want to mix them together as part of a transversal healing or learning process

giving out ayahuasca without having been through the apprenticeship, without having done dietas*, or who only have a few* dietas*. How do you see these attempts to formalise "true"* onanya*?*

It is rather difficult to set out or choose who are the good ones and who are the bad ones. That is difficult in this field. Maybe the elders could tell you that. In the past, it was the elders, the *onanya* elders, who gave the permission for a person to heal others. They could give you the permission to heal but they could not give you a title because being able to heal is not permanent. Because maybe at some point you are able to heal but if you go off track then you won't be able to anymore. Many *curanderos* are good for a certain period of time, but then, depending on their actions, their discipline, they might fall[68]. After some time, they might no longer be good *curanderos*; they might have got involved in other things and then they might fall. Within the world of business and money there are many challenges, for example, a *curandero's* way of living and acting can change, and they can end up losing their strength and ability to heal.

There is something delicate but important in this process of "commercialising relationships". The fact that it is the client who judges whether the curandero *is good instead of the community elders. Also, as the client is the patient, the situation is delicate, because the patient does not know many things that the* curandero *sees and knows. But in a commercial relationship, it is the client who judges, and so if the client is happy (for example that he has had the visions he wanted) then he considers the* curandero *to be good. When it is no longer the elders, the grandmothers and grandfathers, who are monitoring the* curanderos' *work, the recognition of those who can heal becomes highly complex.*

[68] Translators' note: The capacity to heal can be lost, because healing is relational. It involves the capacities of other beings, namely those of the healing plants, not as chemical remedies but as people who collaborate with the *onanya* in order to induce a healing process. Therefore, a *curandero* falls when he makes a mistake, a relational mistake. When he betrays the plants' trust. And a fallen *curandero* is a *curandero* that has lost his capacity to heal. However, this loss might not be definitive. By doing *dieta*, the *curandero* might be able to reestablish trust and collaboration.

Exactly. In relation to this, bad practice on our part – misuse, lack of respect – consists of us allowing ourselves to fill gringos' heads with forms of marketing, ways of "doing business" with the medicine. Like those who say that the effects of a *dieta* last for a year and then you have to do another *dieta*, or when people do *dietas* with *maestros* who are not *maestros*, and then there are risks of death or of people leaving even more crazy than when they arrived.

But above all, it is problematic that those who come to learn could carry a significant trauma. They might have to follow a *dieta* for ten years before being able to begin to learn. But if you say this to them, they might not want to. They won't want to follow a *dieta* for such a long time, without knowing the time frame they will need. And as there is money involved; the *curandero* might deceive them by saying they could learn fast.

"That is when they behave as though this was a supermarket"

Foreigners need to understand that they are guided by human beings who also make many mistakes. We are not angels like they might think … *maestros* sitting in the Amazon forest meditating! We also have our difficulties, our *pruebas*[69]. Because we know that you can't learn that way, without first addressing trauma deeply. And this takes the time that it takes, and you cannot know beforehand how long it will be.

Firstly, you have to deepen your knowledge about where the person comes from. If they come with a trauma, that has to be cleaned first, because if you give them the "apprentice *dieta*"

[69] Later in this book, we clarify what José calls *"pruebas"*, or "tests" and the relationship that exists between *pruebas* and plants. At this point, let's note that a *prueba* is a challenge that stops a person, that "tests them" and, at the same time, is a useful opportunity for learning.

without first doing the work of cleaning the trauma, their *dieta* will be dark. This is the economic *prueba*, the money test. Because if you say to a gringo "we are going to clean the trauma first" they won't want that. You don't know how long it will take to clean the trauma, and the gringo might say "ah! I'm going to look for another *maestro*, another centre". That is when they behave as though this was a supermarket: they come, they pay and they obtain. I pay, and you give me. They think this is like a bar, "give me more ayahuasca or I will go and get more". It doesn't work like that.

Nevertheless, unfortunately, we are moving towards this in the new programmed ayahuasca retreats that exist in every lodge. For example, the program says how many ceremonies have to be done in a retreat. In reality, during a healing, there is no fixed number of ceremonies. So, we are leaning towards this format because the gringos want it to be this way. Because if I say to them "You want a *dieta*? Well get into a *dieta* and we will see what will be part of the *dieta*", they won't accept that, they will think' "ah, I've paid for this, I've paid for five ceremonies!".

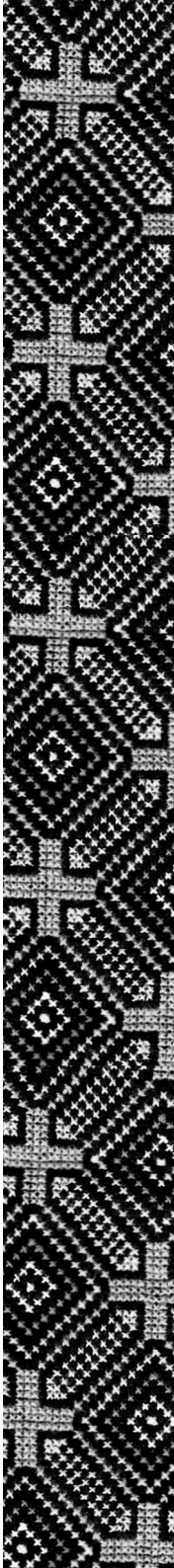
"You can't give ayahuasca to someone you don't know"

It is also important to understand that you can't give ayahuasca to someone you don't know, because you don't know what reaction they will have. Nowadays we practice these kinds of programs and work: we give ayahuasca without knowing the people, and the *dietas* are programmed. We have got ourselves into this way of working and changing it turns out to be really difficult. There are people who come and complain about the food. That is the worst; they think that, as I say, this works like a supermarket, like a hotel. Not even in the best hospital in the world does the patient choose the food. They don't see that we are touching spiritual and energetic parts, that we are pulling out all these traumas that no doctor and certainly no machine would know how

to remove. And then after taking ayahuasca twice and starting to feel better, they start arguing with the cook: “my portion of chicken is too small…”.

Chapter 3

Managing patients in the ayahuasca and *icaro* supermarket



Chapter 3

Managing patients in the ayahuasca and *ícaro* supermarket

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Introduction
"Managing patients in the ayahuasca and *ícaro* supermarket"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

In this chapter we venture deeper into the landscape that accompanies the commercialisation of Shipibo practices. The chapter opens with a major shift of perspective, as we discuss the importance that is given today to the individual experience of ingesting ayahuasca, as part of the opening up of Shipibo traditions to an international public. José questions the focus on "taking ayahuasca" and on individual visionary experiences. He tells us that this way of approaching ayahuasca can impede access to what he considers to be the basis of his medicine, that is to say the respect for the plants.

The figure of the "gringo" is understood here as a mentality and a way of being that José is trying to educate. *"Teaching respect for the plants"* questions the gringo tendency to approach ayahuasca as the "consumer of a product". José tells us that in the past ayahuasca was principally used as an expert tool: the experts took it in order to "see", to diagnose people. While ayahuasca was also recognised as having the capacity to "clean", to "purge" patients, it was uncommon for patients to take ayahuasca regularly while in a healing process. The *onanya* took it to diagnose, as the treatment depended on them. It was they who had, due to their *dietas* and apprenticing, the necessary collaborative relationships with the plants that enable the healing process. Using this difference as a starting point, José discusses contemporary commercial relationships and indicates that the priority given to the ingestion of ayahuasca is something that radically transforms the way in

which patients, or clients, approach the experts. The image of the "supermarket" critiques the transformation of "living" tools, like ayahuasca and the *ícaros*, into consumable products. This "commercial extraction" unbinds ayahuasca from the experts, from their *dietas* and from the changing and situated quality of *ícaros*. This extraction is underpinned by a "pharmaceutical understanding" of ayahuasca, rooted in the idea that ayahuasca "heals by herself".

On the one hand, the "medicine" that José describes, appears to be constantly populated by multiple, entangled collaborations. Neither the plants, nor the experts, nor any healing tool or technique exists alone or in isolation. It is the very entanglement of different beings and practices that together enable the healing processes. And it is this entanglement, with its requirements and demands, its ethics and politics, emergent and situational, which appears as "alive", as the protector of the "living" nature of the decoctions and practices. On the other hand, José critiques the idea of ayahuasca as a being that could have "his own healing intention". He does this by describing the difference between the agency of plants and the agency of humans. Both have the capacity to act, but each in their own way. The "healing intention" is set by humans, especially the experts. Furthermore, ayahuasca requires "offerings of respect" (in the form of restrictions and *dietas*) so that her ingestion can be healing. For her to be "aligned" with this healing intention. In terms of the patients, respect and trust in the plants and in the experts contradicts the idea of individual autonomous therapy. If a healing process is conceived as merely personal development, the entanglement of humans and plants is at risk of being neglected. Therefore, relationships of trust and respect appear in this chapter as the key to the medicinal processes that José proposes.

The defence of an "entangled ayahuasca", inseparable from the learning practices required for her preparation and use, goes hand in hand with the defence of another "living" and fundamental tool in the practice of the *onanya*: the *ícaros*. But what are *ícaros* according to the *onanya*? How are they learned? How do they

emerge during the learning experiences and *dietas* and how can they be used? José talks to us about diagnosing "through discovering with the *ícaros*", or "inside the *ícaro*". The combination of the ingestion of ayahuasca and the *ícaros* – commonly known today as an "ayahuasca ceremony"- is the moment when the *onanya*, by chanting, gain access to what is ailing their patients and to how to help them. Within José's know-how, the medicinal chanting is "the tool and the key". Chanting means discovering, firstly oneself, and then others, and others within oneself. The agency of the *ícaro*, invites us to return to the experience of the shared body and at the same time, insists on the separation between what we are and what the other is. This leads us towards "working without judging" as José terms it. If there is judgement, the *curandero "stays stuck to the illness of the other"*. Both the image of "staying stuck" and the idea of "chanting with judgement" or "healing while judging" are described as limiting states which put an end to the healing process. José associates a further image with this moment when healing dies: "the attack". This image draws us into the world of "*brujería*"[70], a world filled with confrontations between men and women "who know how to work with plants". However, the "attack" also calls our attention to a tipping point where something that heals can transform into something that harms.

The medicinal chanting enables *"unveiling"* or "*diagnosing"* and, at the same time, opens up the possibility of *"re-drawing"*. José uses the image of drawing, and more precisely the idea of "creating a drawing" to describe the way in which, within the chanting, it is

[70] Translators' note: As the words "*brujo*" and "*brujería*" are already Spanish translations and are highly charged with colonial meaning, we have chosen not to translate them into "witch" and "witchcraft", or "sorcerer" and "sorcery" in English, which would entail a further layer of semantic and historical differences that we do not wish to amalgamate. Targeted as "brujos" within colonial society and still today by the various Christian churches in the region, the term "brujo" condenses the mirrors and paradoxes of colonization, evangelization and acculturation. It has become common to use the term "brujo" to refer to "plant specialist", "healers", "traditional medicine practitioners" who are known to do harm, or who agree to do harm for their clients. This term oscillates between local Shipibo ways of using it and a more general category that disqualifies traditional practitioners altogether.

possible to see how *"what doesn't fit, starts to fit little by little"*[71], following the rhythm of the chant. Understanding this practice of healing by chanting is an important challenge for those who have no direct experience of these chants and their effects. What is more, getting close to "what an *ícaro* can do" is part of the discovery of the healing and learning processes themselves. Becoming an *onanya* implies learning how the *ícaro* emerges from the *dietas* and the *pruebas*, and how it can be chanted for oneself and for others. Learning the *ícaro* appears then as a difficult process within which the chanting emerges from difficulties faced.

Both the *ícaros* and the *dietas* of the *onanya* include, embody, and "materialise" past difficulties and healings and that is why they can convert themselves into "medicine" for others. We find here a pragmatic and relational description of what a medicine is, or rather, of how it functions. The *ícaro* becomes a condensation and a container of past healings, transmissible to others during healing acts in situ. The *ícaro* "comes from the plants", José tells us, but the *onanya* chants it. The chants, the *onanya* and the plants are inextricable, and their relationship is reaffirmed and continues to be discovered each time the *ícaro* is brought forth. This means that we could see the *ícaro* as a practice which renews encounters and materialises experiences. Through the *ícaro*, the onanya manages with precision individual healing and collective ceremonial spaces. The *ícaro* is emergent and situational, but at the same time is rooted in long periods of *dieta* and years of practice. This *ícaro*, which is a "key and tool", sits in contrast to the technical or "technified" *ícaro*. Here, José critiques the transformation of the *ícaros* into imitated, repeated, standardised chanting, and compares this transformation to the technology of a mobile phone; an object which can be bought, which is getting smaller and smaller, is the same for everyone and always has to work in the same way. This issue leads the conversation to an analogy between the technification of the *ícaro* and the appearance of new and standardised "ceremony designs", in which all the participants take ayahuasca; and of "modern" *dietas* which are comfortable, programmed and predetermined.

[71] Translators' note: "Fit well" translates the expression *"encajar bonito"* which, despite the apparent ease of the image, is very important for evaluating the efficiency of a treatment. When a person starts doing better, things will start "fitting well", 'things will fit nicely".

"Ayahuasca is a tool that enables vision. She is not made for everyone to take"

How do you see the relationship between the commercialisation of traditional practices, the desire to program or reprogram these very practices, and foreigners' understanding of ayahuasca?

Wanting to program everything to be the same is part of western madness, but in this type of medicine we all have a different process. Ayahuasca is a tool that enables vision; she is not made for everyone to take, as is occurring now. It is now like a bar. What I see is that the majority of people ingest her. Often, they take her to try and they end up seeing what they have read in books, on the internet … they know about the experiences of others who say "ayahuasca has changed my life, now I live in a much better way". Obviously, this can be true, but it also depends on how she is taken, how she is managed and what someone is looking for.

In part, the work with ayahuasca is currently focused on
working out how to educate the gringo
so that they learn to respect the plants,
so that they don't consume them like any other product.

For us, ayahuasca is a tool used to diagnose a person, to know what they have and what they don't have. She is like an x-ray.

And ayahuasca is like the *onanya* of the past. The *onanya* never
went in search of you,
They never said, "come", "heal yourself".
YOU went looking for them.

That is why I feel awful, really awful when I go and sit in front of them to chant to each one of them[72]. It is as if we were the

[72] José is referring here to a highly standardised "ritual design" within the Shipibo practices offered to a foreign public, especially in centres and lodges in the Amazon region. According to this ritual design, the *onanya* begin by chanting some "opening" *ícaros* and then they move around the ceremonial circle to chant, one by one, to each patient.

ones who go looking for them to heal them, instead of them coming to us. Changing this design in the ceremonies would educate the gringo. They should come to receive the chant, one by one, while the *maestro* stays in his place. Because that is how ayahuasca is, you have to search for her. If you don't receive at that moment, you wait[73]. Like the patients in the past who went to the *curandero's* place. A sick woman would arrive, for example, crying in pain and the *curandero* would go out to eat, to take a walk. And when he came back, only then, would he attend to her. There was no emergency. It is not like being in a hospital: you arrive in pain and immediately everyone responds. Back then they would say to you: "wait, feel it, die for a little while" so that you didn't go and do the same thing again afterwards, so that you knew how it hurt.

"Ayahuasca has no intention. We are the ones who go looking for an intention as we move towards her."

You have to go searching for ayahuasca, to ask for her help. Doesn't she have an intention of her own to help us?

"Ayahuasca has no intention. We are the ones who go looking for an intention as we move towards her. If we, with discipline, respect and humility, go and stand beside her and say, "help me", she will help. But she will not help you like a doctor in a hospital, instead you yourself have to make offerings to her with your respect, your *dieta*, your fasting and your discipline. That is the only gift she wants. Respect.

If gringos were respectful, they would not have the intention to make ayahuascaine. Coca would not be what she has become: she would not be an addiction. Coca's good name has been really harmed, but she is a great medicine. Marihuana as well: she

[73] Translators' note: the open-endedness of this way of speaking and of practicing is essential here. You don't know what you will receive. Nor when. But in order to receive, it is necessary to wait.

has been used commercially, or as my mother used to say, for whoring, drunkenness, entertainment and thousands of other things. And it would be tragic if ayahuasca ended up in a night club, as a kind of entertainment. It is really difficult for westerners to truly understand how we work with the plants here. Because it is quite contradictory to what they know. That is why we have to work with our breath in a ceremony, to let the medicine work. When the medicine works well and deeply, you manage it with your breath and the vomiting comes straight away and you feel relieved. The medicine leaves and everything leaves. That is how you clean[74] yourself from the roots.

But if your mentality is that I MYSELF am going to do the work, nothing comes out. You only agitate your body, by following what you have learned in other places about how to clean yourself. You are using that, but it goes against the medicine. This is a resistance. That is why I say, "if you practice yoga, practice with your stones, leave them to one side, come on, let's see, don't use your things, you can use them again once you have left this place but for now this is my ceremony, it is my *dieta*, so respect that, nothing more". Some people like that, and some don't, but then they come to understand. When you take ayahuasca, whatever comes, comes, and you just have to concentrate and breathe. When you can't take it any longer, the vomiting comes, softly, by itself, with strength. When dark things come, you struggle, and it is about staying with it. That is what the *ícaros* are for.

In my ceremonies, the first medicine chants are to take care of and align everyone, and to prepare myself, mentally. On the other hand, when they want to do the work themselves, this is resistance. Like when they say to me "last night I had really beautiful visions, but

[74] Translator's note: The Spanish word "*limpiar*" is often translated as "cleanse", by José's English-speaking patients. However, we chose to translate "limpiar" with "to clean" in order to stay closer to the simplicity and yet the strength of the verb "to clean". To clean in this type of practice works as a synonym of "to heal" and sometimes we have played with this synonymy while translating. Depending on the context, we also use the phrasal verbs "clean up" and "clear out". Healing means clearing things out but also finding out how far the "cleaning up" needs to go.

now I am in darkness" and they block themselves mentally by asking to see what they saw the night before. Ayahuasca does not always give us good visions, not even to *curanderos*. There are lovely nights, average nights, and really gorgeous nights. But the gringos are accustomed to getting what they ask for. And it is not possible to say to ayahuasca "give me vision!" or to say to the *curandero* - "I am paying you, give me vision". Ayahuasca will treat me depending on my actions, how my discipline has been, my integrity in what I do. But if I have been angry with my daughter, I ate dodgy food or I wished something bad upon someone, do you think that ayahuasca will give me a good vision? No, on the contrary, she will give me darkness: "this is you!" in order to make me realise that not everything is about what I want.

"What a *curandero* does is go discovering with his *ícaro*"

The ícaro *also emerges from what we have lived through; it is also part of this kind of "living knowledge" that cannot be standardised or learned by imitation.*

The *ícaro* is a daily practice of lived experience. Let me give you an example: it is like my wife who now has lived experience of being in Europe[75]. It is not the same if I tell her what it is like. She now has her lived experience; nobody can trick her about what Europe is like. She will understand because she has been there. So, it is the same. If I have lived through the same trauma, through the same suffering, then I can understand how the other person feels. It is like understanding someone from my family who is worried about not having any work and then the bills arrive. If I have lived through that, then I will understand how that person feels. And often I will be able to say, "I will support you however I can, because I understand your worries".

[75] Part of the conversations recorded took place in France when José visited with his wife Allison, invited by the ERC Healing Encounters project.

I have read on the internet that the *ícaros* are magical songs, which have no translation. But they do have a translation. That is not the issue. The *ícaro* is a point where you unveil yourself and then you can use it to unveil others. You are delving into a process with the *ícaro*, to see what a patient has, what that person feels. You enter their sadness. And it is different from the patient telling you, or not, their versions of their traumas.

"What a *curandero* does is go discovering with his *ícaro*"; it is better for the *curandero* to discover what a person feels by using his own *ícaro*. As the *curandero*, at that moment, you chant and you enter the other person's feeling. For example, I chant and I enter and I see fighting between my mother and father, I see arguments. I enter the life of this person through my own life. I see my daughter, for example; I feel that my daughter is grown up and she is in a nightclub. Sometimes I am chanting beautifully, and I stop: because I am stuck to my daughter or son. Sometimes I see my son and he looks yellow and addicted to drugs and I am worried. I see my son in old clothes, begging for food, and I am worried. That is to say, I chant and I see the suffering of this woman, of this man. I see their real sadness, their main suffering. And that is how I start to understand how that person worries for their son, for example. Or it might be their lack of desire to eat, their daily anger with their husband because their husband has not cared for them, or because he keeps treating them badly. Or maybe I see a separation, a stepfather who did not treat his son well, and there was abuse and that is why his son fell into addiction. So, I get to these places with the *ícaros*, and I see how a person feels.

Here the tool, the key that enables me to enter, is the *ícaro*. Many of my students think that the *ícaros* come by themselves, that they are easy. And it's not like that. You have to search for them. That is why you have to do *dietas* and *dietas* and *dietas*. And when you feel the darkness, you mustn't let yourself be silenced, you have to insist (with chanting). Because when you are silenced, the darkness grips you; the darkness has made you silent. And once you have been silenced you are gone[76].

[76] Here, "you are gone" could mean "you have lost your concentration" or "your capacity to act using the *ícaros* has gone".

"You chant it all, and as you chant, the *icaro* itself starts fitting beautifully. It is like drawing"

And of course, although what I see is related to my life, I know it is not mine. My mind goes to my life; to my son, for example. For several seconds it has made me worry, it has made me sad, anxious. And that is how I discover - "ah! This is his problem, not what he told me in the circle."[77] So I chant from there, I am not going for the physical side, I am going to the spiritual side and to the mind. Sometimes when someone is going through a separation, I see at that moment my wife coming, and I see that she is with someone else or that she is about to leave me; that is to say, my mind shows me this as if it was mine. Other times when I am chanting, I feel pain in my ovaries, in my lungs, in my head. Then I know that there is an energy becoming attached to that part of the other person. You live through all these things during the *ícaro*. Firstly, you check it all and chant it all, you chant to everything that you feel: to their thoughts, to their son, to the emotion that you are living through… you chant it all. And as you chant, the *ícaro* itself starts fitting beautifully. Everything becomes aligned, like a rhythm, so that you don't get stuck there any longer. It is like drawing.

Is it similar to when singers and artists write a piece of music, a song, from their own experiences?

[77] Within the current designs of "ayahuasca ceremonies", of retreats or of the *dietas* offered to a foreign public, it has become commonplace to open and close ceremonies and to punctuate the retreats with "talking circles" which enable the people present to share their expectations, experiences and visions with the *onanya* and/or with "facilitators" and "translators" (who are almost exclusively also foreigners). The "talking circles" are considered to be important moments for the preparation and/or integration of the lived experiences during the ceremony and/or *dieta*. José notes here that there is a difference between processes that can be experienced through the words and narration of the patients, and the practice of the *ícaros* which are rooted in the capacity for shared experience which does not rely on an intellectual and discourse-based understanding of suffering.

A singer firstly does the arrangement and the demo. They go through that kind of process, but we don't. We go in directly. And the chant does not come from us, it comes from the plants, even though it is us who chant it. This is how the melody fits well, the words fit well. It is as if the phrasing of the melody has a force which vibrates and enters. That is to say, it is like a sound, but it is not arranged. You chant at that moment but there is another moment where there is no more chanting left and so you stop. The chants come and in an instant they stop. Maybe the medicine itself stops, "until the next night!"… it is like a kind of conversation. Sometimes when you chant, it is like you are telling things to the patients, like you are reprimanding them "you are like this, and this, and this …". But the *maestro* shouldn't get stuck in his own dark things. As a *curandera*, if you see your husband doing something bad, you can't get stuck there! If you start to heal patients you get to see, but you can't cling there. That is why you have to always heal your own mistakes,[78] you have to understand what belongs to you, and what belongs to the other person. And that is difficult.

"You have to understand what belongs to you and what belongs to the other person, without judging, otherwise you will get stuck"

An example: imagine a patient who has raped their own son, or has sold their own son, or has participated in some way in killing their mother for material gain. And you, as the *curandero*, see this! Uff! The next day you could get stuck, because you might wake up feeling resentment, and you might not even want to heal

[78] José is referring here to the process of constant cleaning that is implied in being a healer: the need to clean his body of what he feels and what does not belong to him, but also the need to keep his own being and his own life constantly clean to be able to maintain a healing space for other people. In the image that José offers us here, the healer who is not clean risks staying "stuck" in the suffering of the other, because of their own inability to come out of their own suffering, or to distinguish their suffering from that of the other person.

him, you might not even want to see him in your ceremony, or in your house, or in your lodge or centre, that is to say, you take it personally. And many *curanderos* get stuck like this. And the next day, they say "ay! That guy is bad" and instead of healing him, they sink him further down. That is why I have removed many *curanderos* from doing this work in my centre. Because the patients come in search of help, for thousands of mistakes they might have made. But many *curanderos* are not mentally prepared for this kind of thing. Because these kinds of mistakes (I am talking about the biggest mistakes in life) are like monsters. And there are *curanderos* who are chanting and then they stop because they think that the person knows *brujería*, or satanic practices; they feel like the patient is attacking them, like the patient has come to test them. But it is not an attack, it is the *bulto*[79], I mean, what the person is carrying. When the *curandero* is not prepared, he feels afraid, he feels attacked, and he stops because his vision has become dark, and it is unbearable. On the contrary, I have learned how to manage this; as much as these monsters may appear, I look but I don't stay there. In other words, the work in these cases is to clean the *bultos* without involving myself in "why" this *bulto* is there. And if a thought appears that wants to judge this person, it is important to ignore it. Because my only work is to clean away the *bulto*. There are other *curanderos*, however, who want to go in and see what is there. And then they see it and they cannot manage it, and they get stuck there.

Is this non-judgement a position, a constant effort?

[79] The *bulto*, or bundle is the central theme of the next chapter. José talks about the *bulto* to indicate a type of suffering that the onanya knows how to see and to heal. As we will see in detail later, the *bulto* could be described as an accumulation of energy that one "carries" in one's life and body; it could be the result of an "error" and/or a "trauma"; it could include inter-generational and family aspects. See also the section of the introduction entitled "Among the processes that have rooted this book … *bulto*, war, trauma and *brujería*" for further elements.

Yes, it is exactly that. If you start to judge, your mind is activated. Instead of healing, you are damaging the patient. The chanting goes off track, in its rhythm, its tone, it becomes brusque. And that is why many patients say - "ah! I didn't like that, it was like the *maestro's* chant wanted to drive me mad, I don't know what happened …" and what happened was that the *curandero* was chanting in the form of an attack. Instead of looking for a way in and how, without affecting the thoughts and energy of the person, he was going in directly, attacking.

"It is not good to awaken a *bulto* when the mind is not prepared"

You are marking a difference between looking for the way to enter the patient's world and at the same time looking for the way to do that without negatively affecting that person.

Often, it is not good to awaken a *bulto* when the mind is not prepared. That is why I always try to explain things to patients in a different way. I never say to them, "Hey, you were raped, weren't you?" when their mind is not prepared. Because if I tell them everything that I can see, they will get angry with me and they will get angry with the whole world, so I have to have this strategy where I help the gringo to understand and comprehend without activating them mentally. Because there are protections there, making sure they don't remember. And when you throw the protection away, things get dangerous for them and for others. Every person who comes for a *dieta*, is coming for a reason, for something that needs to be cleaned. And things get sorted little by little, but it is a process. So, I take care not to make them angry when I speak to them. In psychology they say you have to go back and re-experience the trauma to get over it, or that you have to

remember what happened to overcome it. However, on the contrary, sometimes that kind of confrontation does even more harm.

I think that many people approach ayahuasca with the idea that: "I have a trauma, and I want to return to my trauma to resolve it" but if I understand you correctly, that is too direct.

I know one example of a woman who was taking part in an ayahuasca retreat in a lodge and she went into her trauma and now she can't get back out. She has been like that for two years now, and so you have to know how to do this and the *ícaros* are very important. That is why in a ceremony without *ícaros*, led by someone who does not master this well, who does not know how to manage this kind of medicine, there are risks; risks that the patient may become more traumatised, that the person may stay stuck in that darkness, or also risks of physical illnesses. An ayahuasca *curandero* has to know how to manage these kinds of energies, he has to know how far he can open, according to how much a person can take. Instead, when you take ayahuasca without guides, with someone who is not measuring your energy and gives you a glassful, you don't know what world you are going to enter. And if you come out again, you are lucky, if you don't come out again, you stay there. That is why they call it a "drug", because it can have negative consequences, but that is due to a lack of respect and lack of management of these kinds of plants.

"Managing patients during a ceremony is like managing rain"

Thinking about risk management, how important is the amount of ayahuasca that is given during a ceremony?

If you give someone a lot to drink, but you keep it light,[80] the experience will be light . Managing all the patients in a ceremony is like managing rain; in that moment the *curandero's* brain is going at a thousand miles an hour because he is managing between 20 or 25 people. You are chanting to one person, and you realise that a darkness is drawing in, like a storm, and it is getting dark. The weather was nice and suddenly you realise it's getting dark. At that moment you were chanting to a patient, and you modify your chanting because you have to try and stop the storm. And you stop it there and then. And once again you go and continue chanting to the patients. It is pretty tough work. However, when you work together with two or three *maestros*, we can agree "ok, you stop the storm while I continue here". Or one stays seated at the altar, in the circle, so he can see and control the storms more easily.

Hopefully one day we will change the design of the ceremony because for me it is very uncomfortable to chant one by one to each patient while moving around the circle. It would be better if they came to where I am sitting in the circle. I would be able to stay in my space from where I can manage all that energy. Because if I am there, like a monkey, going to them one by one (giving or begging, I don't know) it is really tricky to work alone and manage lots of people and storms. That is why it is preferable to stay seated at the altar in the circle to manage it all better. This is what I do now in *Shipibo Rao*: in the first ceremonies of the *dieta* I stay in the circle and another *maestro* chants to the patients one by one. Then, I ask another *maestro* to stay in the circle and I go and chant to the participants one by one. That way there is always somebody to manage the storms.

[80] "Giving someone a lot to drink, but keeping it light" implies that the expert might give a large quantity of decoction (ayahuasca) while controlling the strength of the experience.

"Wanting to learn *ícaros* as if they were an ordinary song means not having understood what learning through *dieta* is"

This way of instrumentalising the plants and the curanderos, *of wanting them to do as they are told, does that also happen with the* ícaros*?*

In the world of the *ícaros* there are also two worlds: one is the *canto masha*, the *canto anixao*: it is a song, to call the rain, for example, so that the plants grow, or it might be a song for my son to grow up well, healthy and strong. The elders can sing these songs, young people can too, and I think there are recordings of this. But the ayahuasca chant, the *ícaro*, has another meaning. It is a language created by the *dietas* and by the plants. It contains psychology, philosophy, spirituality and all of your mental and energetic learnings.

Each *ícaro* is the melody and rhythm that you obtain through your *dieta*. And it is the way one chants, at that moment, to another person. There are many recorded *ícaros*, but those are *ícaros* chanted as if they were in a laboratory, in order to be studied. And that is something else altogether. They are chanted for recording. But if you chant *ícaros* with ayahuasca, it is because you are diagnosing a person: you chant what the person feels, what they have lived through. Then you move on with your bucket, you chant, and it is the same, it is the same rhythm, but the words change. Depending on if someone is grumpy, if she is jealous, if she suffers because of her husband, if she doesn't love her husband, if her stomach hurts, if her head hurts; in other words, you go over to her and you chant, "I am really crazy, I really like liquor and beer", then you move over to someone else: "she is very beautiful, how lovely". The *ícaro* sings what you feel. Firstly, you check, you advise, and at the same time you rebuke the person, you get angry for a while. The moment you are chanting the *ícaro* in front of them, that's when

they want to shout or when the vomiting comes, or when they become resistant and they think you are bad. Another night you don't chant the same thing. There might be more harmony, more psychology, more reflection, more emotions. At that point you might start building the "tower"[81], opening up the patients' hearts, so they start to feel better, more tranquil, more at peace. Without forgetting the protection, which is also an *ícaro*. The *ícaro* works in different ways. But if you sing an *ícaro* as a *"masha"* it becomes like the national anthem! It is like music that I can write and then sing. Some people might sing it beautifully and other people even more beautifully. But they all repeat the same thing. Instead, the *ícaro* depends on what you are seeing, the world you are seeing.

In the beginning I would get annoyed with people wanting to record, wanting to learn the *ícaros* as though they were an ordinary song because that means not having understood what learning through *dieta* is, and not respecting the learning of those who carry out this type of healing, those who have practised *dietas* to learn how to diagnose and heal people. But many gringos understand the *ícaro* as this other Shipibo song: the *canto masha*. For example, on the Shipibo radio station there are other songs (which are part of a dance ritual) which also include bongos. But you can't put bongos into an *ícaro*, because that would change it, because the rhythm has to keep steady. Maybe at the start you chant slowly, then slower, then faster. It is really difficult to copy. That is why every ayahuasca *curandero* has his own *ícaro*. But those ayahuasca *curanderos* who have only followed a *dieta* for three or four months in a lodge and they say they know how to chant and, according to them, they have written their own *ícaro*, they have actually done so by copying from a *maestro* or *maestra*. They are just copying... like they try to turn an *ícaro* into an *"ícaro masha"* and ayahuasca might punish them for this. And this happens a lot

[81] Image that the *onanya* sometimes refer to as a vision of the building up of the healing process and healing capacity.

in the lodges when the people who chant have not followed the sufficient number of *dietas* and they don't draw the *ícaro* from the *dietas*.

"The *ícaros* have also become like a technology"

Today, the majority of Shipibo learn to be *curanderos* at an advanced age and they learn in order to work in a commercial way. In a workshop you can earn 1,500 soles or 2,000 soles, and they think "wow! Great! I will stop being a teacher and earn more money doing that!" and they start doing *dieta* because they want to work in this way. There are others who have suddenly lost their child, or their wife has left them, or they have rivalry with someone, and they start doing *dieta* while carrying the weight of their traumas. When you do *dieta* in that way, you can't learn what's good. Your mind will be heavy, your heart will be heavy, and you are never going to be able to understand the needs of others. This happens often among the Shipibo and that is why attacks exist. Some people call it *"brujería"* because they have learned full of hatred, charged with their own traumas, without having taken the time to heal first. Instead of love and light growing in them, their trauma grows. And obviously in every plant or tree, there are two paths, a good one and a dark one. When this happens, the ceremonies are dark. But instead, when you learn as a child, a child just wants to play, eat and sleep, does not have bank debts, does not have a wife, is not thinking of being cheated on. So, when you learn at a certain age with this purity, it makes you grow and become strong and you can manage everything that might come, because you learned from something cleaner, purer. That is why in the past nobody learned at the age of 20 or 30 years old. The *meraya* and the *onanya* learned from the age of 7 onwards.

Compared with the old *maestros* or with people who have long *dietas*, it is becoming normal nowadays to treat the *ícaros* like a technology. I think it is also because of the lodges and the timetables they impose: from this time until that time, in that order, the *maestros* have to chant to each patient for the same amount of time. Programmed, and similar to the technology we go out and buy. In the past, mobile phones were big, huge, with an antenna and everything, but since then they have become smaller. Now they have touch screens and internet. Today *ícaros* are being approached with this same mentality: they shorten their words, limit their time, they want them all to be the same, they have to be able to be recorded, and the same *ícaro* has to work for everybody. It is no longer the old *ícaro*, the one that had its own language created through *dieta* and given by the plants. Those chants were really long. Today, everybody thinks they can chant *ícaros*, like they repeat an ordinary song. And the words of many *ícaros* have become repetitive. Today I see that the *maestros* who start doing *dieta* in order to work in the lodges, chant the same thing to every person. In the past, there were old words, with other meanings. If people had *sustos*, if they were experiencing traumas, straight away you had to chant that. Checking over the life of the person first: where their problems came from, where the illness started, why, how, when. You have to chant their mistakes and also their good actions. First you go down and then you start to unblock. From there you go down again to start aligning. The melody and the words follow the same rhythm and, in an instant, it changes: the rhythm changes, the words change. In other words, the world in which you are doing the work changes. We call "worlds" what we see when we are chanting each person's history, or each person's problem, or each person's wellbeing. These are the *ícaros* that manage to go deep, that come from a real *dieta*, from how you yourself have learned with the plants, from your own knowledge, and when you really take [ayahuasca] and enter the worlds where you have to enter, it is intense! That is why you have to be prepared with your *dietas* and in your daily life.

There are some recorded *ícaros* chanted by great *maestros* who chant really beautifully. And many people listen to these chants and repeat them. And that is how the *ícaros* become repetitive. There are even lodges where I have seen people with their radios listening to recordings. But you don't learn this that way. And it has often made me laugh, everybody listening, practicing how to chant, copying. And what is more, if you learn like that, you will forget the *ícaro* at the moment of the ceremony. When you are really *mareado*[82] with the medicine, in the kind of *mareación* that you need to diagnose the patient, only a real, medicinal *ícaro* can come out because it comes out with the force of the *curandero's dietas*. Because in that moment you forget the world, completely. Nothing exists, only your soul, your body and your heart. Your mind is totally there in that moment. You want to get up and your body vanishes, but your mind is strong. At that moment, the only thing you want is to be relieved; you want to come out of there, you long to feel good. You need to breathe, you need life. That is why many *curanderos* today don't take the amount of ayahuasca that they should take to be really *mareado* in the ceremony. They take little to be slightly *mareado* and to be able to chant by imitating, without having to drag the chant from their own *mareación*. They take a little so that it is controllable, manageable. So that they can remember the copied chant and they sing it. They do it out of obligation: and as gringos don't understand this, they don't see it. It is enough for them to receive their *ícaro*. But that is not what this is about. This is about trying to respond to their quest for healing.

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[82] Translators' note: This refers, as a verb, as a noun or as an adjective, to the effect resulting from the ingestion of ayahuasca or some other plants. We could have translated it as "altered state", "dizziness", "drunkenness", "sickness" or "vertigo". None of these translations would have carried the way in which the *mareación/mareo* functions a space of medical research and healing action for the *onanya*. We have therefore kept the Spanish.

Chapter 4

The *Bulto*

Chapter 4

The *Bulto*

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Introduction
"The *bulto*"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

In this chapter we enter into a dialogical vision of suffering and illness thanks to the image of the "*bulto*". The *bulto*, José tells us, is something that people can be *"carrying"*, like a bundle, something that is "kind of stuck", making people ill and destroying the possibility of a peaceful life (both inwardly and outwardly). In addition to being an image, the *bulto* appears simultaneously as a diagnosis, an aetiology and a socio-historical theory.

The image of the *bulto* that José introduces to us, is one of the fruits of his own therapeutic and ethnographic research, as the majority of his patients *"carry bultos"*. His study of the *bultos* indicates a particular depth of healing at the aetiological level, in the search for the causes of what makes people ill. The way in which the *bulto* "makes people ill" or "destroys a life" emerges as a profoundly relational knot. The *bulto* is stuck to the body of a person, but at the same time, it is formed throughout generations, it is maintained by the negative dynamics that can live inside a "family body" and is fed by interactions with other people and *"their bultos"*.

The intergenerational aspect of the *bultos* (namely their origin and transmission through family lineage) calls into question a uniquely cognitive and narrative understanding of *bultos*. The bulto challenges the idea of individual memory, demanding a wider, more felt-sense vision of memory. It requires thinking about a memory that lives in bodies, and more specifically, interrelated bodies. Because of this, understanding the *bulto* implies dialogical depth which emerges from meeting with patients, in order to sense the kind of help that the majority of these patients need and the

importance that they give to the notion of trauma and healing from their traumas.

Illness understood as a "*bulto*" appears here as being simultaneously physical, emotional, mental, social, ecological and historical. It came to José as a vision, prompting him to develop a new, specific theory; a meeting point between two ways of thinking about and treating harm and its causes, which are usually seen as different. On the one hand, "active intergenerational trauma", and on the other hand, "harm caused by *brujería*". Active intergenerational trauma and the harm caused by *brujería* converge in the same image: "a *bulto which has a guardian*" who attacks whoever tries to heal it or heal themselves. We find here a very specific image which arises from José's research into how his international patients' illnesses function. At the same time this vision is rooted in an analogy that offers a concept (for him more traditional and perhaps more local in nature) for understanding and treating that which makes people ill (harm caused by *brujería*).

The convergence of these two diagnoses arises from José's practice, and more specifically from what he sees "*within the medicine*". We enter with him into this image of the "active *bulto*" as a diagnostical concept and also as a visionary, sensory and lived experience. When José speaks about his visions, he takes us into both his ayahuasca ceremonies and into the dreams which punctuate his daily life and the sensations which tell him that *"patients with bulto"* are arriving at his healing centre. Within these visions, sensations and perceptions, intergenerational trauma and the harm caused by *brujería* appear to José in the same way: as spaces of destruction, defended by "guardians" who block entry.

The active, attentive and intentional nature of this kind of harm, is given form in another image analogy in which José compares an "active *bulto*" with the design of "concentration camps". This comparison arises from a process which José and I have been sharing for some time, with respect to the traumas of war and which have led us to visit the remains of a second world war concentration camp situated in Belgium. For further

information on this process, I invite you to read the section of the introduction to this book entitled "Among the processes that have rooted this book: *bulto*, war, trauma and *brujería*".

It has been necessary for José to study *"the bulto"* in order to heal *bultos*, and I am referring here to *dietas* designed with the intention of delving more deeply into this kind of knowledge. The conclusion that José shares with us in relation to this is liberating, peace-making and diplomatic: "the work is to clean away the *bulto*, *without attacking*". As we search for understanding and putting into words the cleaning of *bultos* and the ways of diverting the action of the guardians, we land upon the possibility that a person can behave like "the guardian of their own trauma" (or of their own *bulto*). This image describes the idea that the person themself might be acting in a way which inhibits their own healing. Another form that "resistance" to healing can take leads the conversation towards the impact of relational and social dynamics such as "gossip", or slander. The conversation about guardians and gossip leads us to discuss *bultos* which feed each other, which therefore have an "echo" and reinforce each other mutually.

As José considers "gringo *bultos*" and "amazonian *bultos*", he concludes that "many people practice things that are known as *brujería* in the world of *curandero* practice". He therefore expands both the understanding of trauma and of practices which are usually understood as *"brujería"*. We are invited here to think about what it means to "carry something which is no longer useful, and which causes harm" and at the same time to get a sense of a kind of medicine which includes the collective and which questions the way we live and behave in society. Indeed, at the end of this chapter, Jose offers us the opportunity to think about "good *bultos*", those intergenerational bundles made of practical wisdom which enabled community living and which sit in contrast to the modern way of life, which he compares (as he compares all of us, himself included) to chickens in industrial battery farming.

"Many people come here with trauma; trauma can be like a *bulto*, a bundle that you carry, a bundle that is stuck to you"

¿What can your medicine heal that other kinds of medicine perhaps don't know how to treat or maybe don't manage to see?

Many people come here with traumas. Many people medicated with antidepressants, who visit psychologists and psychiatrists; people who no longer have hope that they can find any light. So, with ayahuasca we look for the plant that is needed, we take out the trauma and we place a light there instead, right there; we insert this strength, this peace of light; and in that way the person feels more self confident. If they feel unlikeable then they will feel more likeable, they will love themselves, and not with words, instead they will simply love each thing they do, or each day they receive, or each night that they sleep, or each food they eat. They learn to give thanks. Instead, when they are in that well of trauma, they say "damn! I want to die! Why did my mother bring me into this world? I want to leave it! What is the point of this life? This life is shit". But when that person is out of there, really standing straight in their centre, they look at the world and they see beauty. That is the spirit of the plants and the *ícaros*. But each person has to find the strength to stand straight, right in their centre.

Many people come here allergic; with allergies to wheat, to sugar, to fish, to shellfish, and many other things. And they are people who have significant traumas inside themselves, because of an accident, or an illness, or many other things. And that trauma is really glued; it sticks to their heart, their chest, their throat, and it is inside their head and their stomach. And when a person lives with that, they realise that they are not feeding themselves; I mean that person does not feed themselves because they want to, they feed themselves because they have to. Because they have to feed their body: like giving petrol to an engine.

You use the word "trauma" a lot. What is trauma for you, how does it work and how do you perceive it?

Trauma can be like a *bulto*, a bundle that you carry; a bundle that is stuck to you. Often, when people carry a *bulto*, they want to understand the things that are wrong or that they have done wrong, why their mum is ill or why their son is crazy. They want a change in their life, or they remember the negative things they have done. "Suddenly I am paying for the things that I've done" some of them say. Often, we feel these *bultos* at a particular age. There are few people in the world who catch on to this early in life. The majority take time to feel their *bulto*. And they are not simply things from your own life, they come from your parents, from your ancestors. The majority feel their *bulto* from the age of 35-40 years old because from this age onwards, awful things start to happen to them. Nothing happens to those people who are not carrying a *bulto*, they have a peaceful old age. But people who are carrying a *bulto*, feel it from more or less the age of 32 for men, and 38-40 for women. That's when the "misfortune in their life" starts. As much as they may have power, money, beauty, status, something is bound to happen, something significant, which will cause them a great deal of pain in their life. And these people have the worst things happen to them and they receive their old age in a pretty awful way. Many people end up lying flat in a hospital bed, others in a mental hospital or with all kinds of illnesses, things which are not welcome in a peaceful life.

"THE *BULTO* IS LIKE DARKNESS GAINING GROUND FROM GOODNESS. IT COMES FROM THE LINEAGE TRAUMAS OF GRANDPARENTS, GREAT-GRANDPARENTS, GREAT-GREAT-GRANDPARENTS. IT IS EVERYTHING THE PERSON IS CARRYING"

The *bulto* is like darkness gaining ground from goodness. In an ayahuasca vision, you, as the *curandero*, enter and you see a body with a dark part. And when you want to enter this darkness, you become afraid, like it makes you think about yourself. At that moment your daughter comes, or your mum, I mean all the people you love. You want to enter, and your mind is already connected to fear, fear for your loved ones... and you start to look here and there, and you say: "wow, what is happening to my daughter? What is happening to my mum?" You start to feel anxiety, anguish, depression, physical pain. You feel it at that moment. But when you know how to manage it, you enter, and then you start feeling how the other person feels. And in that moment, anger is activated, pain is activated, revenge, all that is negative, and you enter the other person's *bulto* and you see their darkness. That *bulto* comes from the lineage traumas of grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents. It is everything that the person is carrying.

¿The bulto *isn't the trauma from the person's life, it is what the person is carrying from their lineage?*

The *bulto* is not your own. There are personal traumas, which are yours, and this type of trauma can be healed simply with ayahuasca. Ayahuasca cleans it and with *ícaros* even better. But many human beings carry things that are like great errors in life and many people are really stuck to them and so they come looking for ayahuasca. For the people who are in this kind of darkness, in this *bulto*, it is really difficult to come out of it by taking ayahuasca once, and many people are disappointed by this. I have many patients and people who not only take medicine, but who have done many *dietas* (not just with me but also with my mum or with other *maestros*, centres and lodges and so on, which are well-recognised) who have been doing healing *dietas* (not apprenticeship *dietas*) for two or three years, in their search for liberation, and they say to me "I cannot find this liberation, I feel the same". These are people who are carrying those *bultos*. Healing personal traumas is easy because

you simply chant to the person sitting in front of you but for people who are carrying *bulto* from the ancestral line, it is more difficult, there is a huge amount of work that comes when you open that up!

"It is like fighting against a really knowledgeable *curandero* or *brujo*"

It is like fighting against a really knowledgeable *curandero* or *brujo*[83], against an expert who has a wide-ranging apprenticeship that comes from having done *dietas* with many trees for a long period of time[84]. So, you heal over here and it appears over there; you heal that, and another piece of their knowledge appears. It is like a malignant cancer that keeps sprouting up; that is to say, you heal one *bulto* and another *bulto* appears. There is no time frame, you cannot say when this will stop. What the elders say when you are faced with this kind of harm done by another *curandero* is "well, that one has a lot of knowledge, and he will get tired. The only way to heal is to tire him out and then he might forget about you."

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[83] Translators' note: As the words *"brujo"* and *"brujería"* are already Spanish translations and are highly charged with colonial meaning, we have chosen not to translate them into "witch" and "witchcraft", or "sorcerer" and "sorcery" in English, which would entail a further layer of semantic and historical differences that we do not wish to amalgamate. Targeted as "*brujos*" within colonial society and still today by the various Christian churches in the region, the term *"brujo"* condenses the mirrors and paradoxes of colonization, evangelization and acculturation. It has become common to use the term *"brujo"* to refer to "plant specialist", "healers", "traditional medicine practitioners" who are known to do harm, or who agree to do harm for their clients. This term oscillates between local Shipibo ways of using it and a more general category that disqualifies traditional practitioners altogether.

[84] During *dietas,* the "dieted" plants can be vines, bushes or trees. Tree *dietas* are considered to be the hardest but also permit a deeper level of knowledge. It is interesting to note that in the Shipibo language there is no generic word for "plants". What we call "plants" are instead generalised in the following three words: nishi (vine), *jiwi* (tree or *"palo"* in local Spanish) and *shobi* (herb or bush). For further information on the Shipibo system of botanical classification, see "Ethnobotany of the Shipibo Conibo" by Tournon J. (et al) in the bibliography. In addition to these categories, the word *"rao"* describes plants that heal and teach, and they can be bushes, trees or vines.

Do you mean that ancestral traumas, bultos, *function like harm caused by a highly knowledgeable amazonian plant expert?*

Exactly. Let's suppose that I want to harm that person over there, so I take ayahuasca in my ceremony and I place this harm onto her by chanting. In Shipibo this is called *shitana*[85]. I place it with a strong *arcana*[86], that is to say I protect it well, I place it in a space, in a very delicate design, so that no-one notices how she became ill, how she got into an accident. I close up all these details and the person becomes ill, it might be an accident, a little fall, a snake, or something else. And I don't align her thoughts to me[87], that is to say instead I try to erase all connection with myself. And I leave her that *bulto* right there. Let's continue supposing that she finds a great *curandero* (one who really knows) and this *curandero* starts to discover that there is a *bulto* there and the *bulto* is energy, it is a dark *bulto*, with no escape; a *bulto* that shuts down her happiness. And I am keeping alert to this (because I have done that to her). And when someone tries to clean it, the healing work shocks me[88]. As we *curanderos* constantly take medicine, it means that in that moment, "I" who did the harm, will see that someone is healing her. But if I have in mind that I want to see her messed up, I send her another piece of my knowledge. She was healing and now another thing takes hold of her[89].

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[85] Shipibo term that José often uses as a kind of synonym for *"brujería"*. At the same time, this word describes a diagnostic. Plants, plant experts and other non-human inhabitants of the forest have the ability to harm as well as to heal people. This ability to harm is known as *shitana*.
[86] The *"arcana"* will be described in more detail in other parts of this book, particularly in Chapter 9. For now, we would like to clarify that this is a "protection" and that it can be "placed", through an *ícaro*, onto a person. In this instance we are talking about the way in which a *curandero* can chant harm (do harm) to another person and place a protection over this harm to maintain it and hide it.
[87] It can be understood here that the very work of harming can carry a protection that prevents the person from realising that harm has been done to them by that particular *curandero*.
[88] See Glossary for an explanation of the translation of the Spanish verb "chocar" with "to shock" in English.
[89] José is referring to the fact that *curanderos* in their frequent states of *mareación* can see inside the harms and the healings that are taking place around them or in relation to people they are connected to.

And when someone brings an intergenerational "family" bulto, does this bulto work in the same way?

In the same way. That is why many people look really happy walking in the street, but their life is darkness, they don't manage to make things fit well in their life. Lots of negative things happen to them, they get ill, because they are carrying this *bulto* and if they don't work on the *bulto*, those same things will happen to their children. And they get to an age where they ask themselves "why my daughter? What is happening to her? What have I done to her?" or maybe they think "all the bad things I have done, life is making me pay for them now" when there are negative things that happen to their children; when they are grown up and they see that their children hate them, that they treat them as a disturbance or that their daughter is with a man who is not worth it, even though he hits her she stays with him; or that she is raped, or she has a lot of setbacks in her life, or she no longer wants to study; in other words, she goes into a world with the same darkness as the one her mother and father are carrying. And that is when the "*bulto* of life" arrives. Because you bring up your children and you want to give them the best you can, obviously when they are small, they don't give you any problems, they ask when they want to eat, or they cry, but they don't give you any kind of problem.

It can happen, if life wants to mess you up from an early age, the worst that can happen to you is that your child grows up with or is born with a physical malformation, autism, epilepsy or with one leg, or is mute, or blind. Or sometimes this manifests itself in a different way. Your child grows up and gets into addiction, they leave you, they run away, they are never there with you. Or they worry you, "where is my child? Who have they gone off with?" And then your daughter becomes a drug addict, or an alcoholic. And that is most preoccupying. That finishes you off and you don't sleep, because you are thinking "what will become of them?" or "where will they end up?", that is to say, the situation makes you

remember the things that others did to you or the things that you did, and your brain starts to burst. These things happen when there is a *bulto* in our lives

And is this bulto*, the malice in this* bulto*, the darkness, so active that when you start to clean, it is as though a* brujo *was actively maintaining the harm there?*

It depends. It could be that it is no longer active, like in an old house that no longer has anyone looking after it, that is abandoned, left to its own devices. There may be a lot of rats, spiders' webs, snakes, that could bite you, but they will not kill you. You are afraid to go in, sleep, eat there, but if you have a good *dieta*, as a *curandero*, you go in with a tractor and you knock it all down and clean it all up. But if you don't have a good *dieta* or you don't have the money to pay a *curandero* then you will be doing it alone. And you can do it, but it takes time. If you have strategies from plant *dietas*, then you can get your people together. That is how it works. That is how we experience this. And if you have *dietas* with many plants, you have your *calichines*[90], you have your people. And with a super *dieta*, well, then you have the machinery, and you can clean it up even quicker. Although, those who are searching for healing also need to have self-discipline.

"When the *Bulto* is active, it is like it has guardians, it is like in the concentration camps"

When the bulto *has guardians, is it active? And what are these "guardians"?*

[90] Your allies.

When it is active it has guardians. You want to enter, and they are already targeting you. Imagine, it is like in the concentration camps: everybody was in there, locked in, and yet nobody could get inside this torture. No civilian or other person could get in unless they were authorised. They would shoot you just for approaching the entrance[91]. That is what the guardians do. That is to say, that is where the guardians place themselves. As a *curandero*, five days before a person comes to do a *dieta*, or before they enter a ceremony, you start to get nightmares, physical pain, family problems, things like that. When I notice this, I already know what is going to happen; or rather, what is about to arrive.

And do the majority of gringos' intergenerational bultos *have a guardian?*

The active ones have a guardian and the ones that aren't active don't have one. The question is: in which case is there still a guardian? There are people who are looking for a way to free their conscience, to get rid of this ego that we always carry around with us. Because the ego produces fear. No matter how many times someone says, "I'm not afraid of anyone!", they are talking like that because they are afraid, or they say, "I don't need anything from anyone!", or "I don't need anyone, I can do everything by myself!". These are things that many of us say, words we use as weapons to defend ourselves… but through our ego. Because of the pride of our ego. But it is a defence that doesn't really exist; a defence that is just words and mind. And when you are carrying an old *bulto*, obviously your life is not ok. In life you get to know good people and bad people, good partners and bad partners. And if your mum and dad are alive, your grandfather is still alive, you see how your mum keeps making mistakes or your dad too and, therefore, so do you. You already are in that world. And in your own relationships you will be making those same mistakes. You might have an attitude of

[91] This comparison between an active *bulto* and the concentration camps emerges from a shared process which is discussed in more detail in the introduction to this book, entitled: Among the processes that have rooted this book…*bulto*, war, trauma and *brujería*.

gossiping, judging, criticising, complaining, condemning, etc. But you'll never be the first to give a good example. And because of all the complaints and demands you start gaining enemies. So, through these relationships you are activating the *bulto*, you are fuelling it. You are feeding the *bulto*.

"MANY PEOPLE PRACTICE THESE THINGS THAT WE CALL *BRUJERÍA* IN THE WORLD OF *CURANDERO* PRACTICE. IT IS LIKE THAT ALL OVER THE WORLD"

One example: if you fight with your partner, they are not going to see you in a good way, they will envy you, will wish bad things on you. Maybe in front of other people, they have a good attitude towards you because they want something from you, or simply because they like you and therefore, they show you the best of themselves. But when the relationship starts to get darker, they will show you their worst side. So, it is like that, there are people who love and respect you and there are people who don't respect or value you, on the contrary, they wish you ill. Many people practice these things that we call *"brujería"* in the world of *curandero* practice in amazonian or South American terms, although it is like that all over the world.

And there are also really filthy people who pay someone with more knowledge so that things go badly for another person. How many people do you think have come looking for me to do work to separate a couple, or to make some business or other go badly for someone? Or to make a project fail, or to make a person become ill, or to stop a child from being born from his mother's womb, etc. Lots and lots of people! When I was 14 years old, my mother would send them away, even though we were living in the city, and we had nothing to eat. The thing is that the more difficult

a situation is, the more you have to turn towards goodness. That is how I understood this from a young age. And I would ask myself: how can there be so many nasty people asking for these horrible things?

When we go down the road of this kind of learning and knowledge, we can fall because of a strong reaction from our ego. That is how many people fall. Lots of people who create something, a business, a project, a company, many families who are living well with their children, then fall, they destroy themselves, they collapse, because of these reactions. What is happening is that they keep carrying the *bulto* and they keep feeding the *bulto*. And in the end this *bulto* covers them up, it darkens them.

"We ourselves are the guardians of our own *bulto*"

Do you mean that the behaviours that we don't manage to change are the things that feed the bulto*? Is that why they function like a guardian? So, are we the guardians of our own* bulto*?*

Exactly, that is a really good way of saying it. It is what we *curanderos* call "resistances", because we ourselves are the guardians of our own *bulto*; we ourselves do not allow the *bulto* to be cleared out. We say, "come in and clean my house" but we also stay there like a guardian, saying "don't come in! don't come in!". That is the *bulto*. It is very difficult to explain.

The Ashàninka[92] helped me a great deal to understand the way in which *bultos* work and how to manage them given that we ourselves continue to be the guardians of those dark aspects. We generally keep these *bultos* active via our acts of ego and pride. But

[92] Indigenous people close to the Shipibo People in the central Peruvian Amazon region.

sometimes it is not even a case of ego or pride but that we get involved with people who activate our *bultos* again. Instead, when we free ourselves from a *bulto*, this work that we call "cleaning or liberation" begins to sow seeds, so that something new can grow. And we put the famous *arcana*[93] there: the protection. The *arcana* is really important because if we react badly again (because we are human beings and we have mistaken reactions, sometimes when we feel grieved, or when we tell it like it is, or when we affirm our boundaries) the protection, which is something new that has been planted, no longer lets these energies get in. Other people can try to harm you, can send you a curse, but it no longer gets in; you are no longer feeding the *bulto*, you are protected. You walk and nothing happens to you. That is the work we do.

Here the main idea is clearing out and aligning the *bulto*. And it is not easy. That is why "*dieta* crossing" happens, because there is a *bulto* and this *bulto* is so active and strong that the very darkness befuddles you and makes you cross. I am healing you and the *bulto* appears, testing you, for example, so that you eat an ice-cream, and you eat it. I say to you "now don't get angry with your husband, please, I have chanted an *ícaro* to you" and you don't care, the days pass by and you are already doing the same thing again. Like the *bulto* covers you up and doesn't let you get out, because it is strong, and you don't manage to do anything about it.

That is why I always say to the people who come: "this is your own responsibility". Every person who comes has to do their part of the work, and if not, what they felt when taking ayahuasca (that love, that strength, that freedom) will not benefit them; two days will go by and once more they will go back to the same again. To find this freedom, this strength, you have to do the post-*dietas*.

[93] Translators' note: *Arcana* is the main subject of the conversations in chapter 9. It is a "protection", it is a "chant", and it is made to be invisible, or "hidden". It is a protection and is "put" into a person by chanting. It is a verb (*arcanear*), an adjective (*arcaneado/a*) and a noun (*arcana*). Somebody who is "*arcaneado/a*" or that "has an *arcana*" has therefore received one through chanting. It is made by the *onanya* but it is part of their healing work in which *onanya* and plants are inextricable.

And also, it is not as if you do your post-*dieta* and your life changes, that is to say, it is a process that you yourself have to work on. Sometimes you have to distance yourself from the places where you are standing or where you are walking. It hurts, but you have to do it for your own good.

"Don´t go thinking that in the Amazon region there are no *bultos*!"

And what can you tell me about the bultos *that people from the Amazon region carry? Do they also carry* bultos, *including intergenerational ones?*

Of course, don't go thinking that in the Amazon region there are no *bultos*! Now then, in a community there are of course *bultos*; in towns like Iquitos, Pucallpa, Cusco, there are a lot. One example: I am with my wife, and we have brought some *curanderos* to work in our centre and we have fired some staff because they behaved badly. But they don't accept their mistakes, they think that we have got rid of them because we want to distance them and they often go to other *maestros* and throw things at us: they wish us ill, they don't want to see us together or they don't want people to come to *Shipibo Rao*. With these actions they are starting to feed their own *bultos* and they are feeding the infamous gossip, the poison of the world! They say, "but they say this about you … and she says that about you". That is how they start feeding other people who also go against you, through their own *bultos*. And they say things about you and those people who used to respect you no longer open their door to you. That is how the *bultos* feed each other. And so, I am with my family, and they start saying things to me, or she goes to see her family and they say things to her, or I go to see my friends and they say things to me, gossip with an echo! And instead of talking openly about it, you keep it to yourself, and you invent stories, and then you start thinking bad things about that person,

or you want to find out, you want to know the whereabouts of that person who is speaking badly about you, and what it is they are saying. And so, the *bulto* has now gripped you, you are caught in the intrigue; you can't rest until you find out. That is sadly how it works. What has to be done in this case is to clean it up but not attack. Simply clean it up. Because when a person no longer has the *bulto*, they will no longer seek that revenge, that war, they won't want to drop bombs on anyone. So, it is just about persisting, cleaning up, and carrying on.

"WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND IS THE VALUE A PERSON GIVES TO THE *BULTO*. THE ATTACHMENT THAT THEY HAVE TO THE *BULTO*"

I would like to understand better why you use this word, or this image, of a "bulto"...

A *bulto* is like a rucksack, like a tumour, something that you carry. Imagine, you might be growing up well and suddenly something appears that stops you from feeling well; you get worried. It might be something you can feel, something physical for example. But when it is energy, something spiritual, we don't feel it, as if we can't feel what we are carrying. My mum used to say "but what are you carrying here? Your old things, that old bucket, the old saucepan… it would be better to throw them away". That is what we call *bulto*, things that aren't worth keeping but we keep carrying them. What you have to understand is the value a person gives to the *bulto*. The attachment that they have to the *bulto*.

"THERE ARE ALSO GOOD *BULTOS*. A GOOD *BULTO* IS HOW WE USED TO BEHAVE IN THE COMMUNITIES"

Is a bulto *stuck by definition? Is it something you get stuck to and that, at the same time, sticks to you?*

Yes, but there are also good *bultos* that it is a shame to lose. We do positive things, sometimes we forget about that. For example, a good *bulto* is how we used to behave in the communities. I myself am thinking of reconnecting with my community to find a way to bring healing there with good *maestros*. So that a place could open up for people who want to take medicine and heal themselves. The good habits that we used to have before, when we *curanderos* took ayahuasca without taking any payment, for our community, when our people would come and look for healing. But now people don't do that, now we are more involved in the gringo world, for money. And I am part of that too. If they don't pay me, I don't take ayahuasca… something like that. That is how you get separated from a good *bulto*. When someone comes from the community you don't want to chant any more. But if a gringo comes, well, then you do chant. Instead of finding yourself again, of reconnecting with the old ways, with what is better and more essential than money, like chanting to a humble person who has no money to pay. So, we dissociate and we forget the good things that really exist in life, and it is really good to act or practice with this aim because really that is how you learn to help people.

"TO PUT IT PLAINLY, WE ARE JUST LIKE LITTLE CHICKENS IN INTENSIVE FARMING NOW"

These intergenerational traumas make me think that for many generations there might not have been anyone knowledgeable about how to look at these bultos,

somebody who would know how to clean these traumas. And that is how they become "bultos". *As though the* bultos *were asking for a kind of medicine that is not sufficiently available or accessible or consulted, either in the Amazon or in other countries.*

Exactly, we are just like little chickens in intensive farming now, because they put us under light bulbs, they give us pills, they make us grow and that's it. Our growth is framed within a program of physical evolution, we are only looking after our physical self, but not taking care of cleaning the house, which is our internal self, because where we should really be clean is inside. In practical terms, in this life, we are being designed to only look after the external side of things. It would be lovely if our internal self was also in just as good order: if there was a place to sleep, a place to cook, a place for the fridge, and one for the plugs. Sometimes we keep it clean but at other times we are full of the traumas that we were talking about. It´s only our outsides that get looked after so that we don't look ugly, so that we don't look like we have deteriorated, but nobody takes on the job of internal cleaning. Instead, nowadays, many people only value "medical science" and "the body". But the rest of us never rests. Our body rests, yes, but in reality, we never die. What is not physical goes to other places, to another level. So, death does not exist, it is just this marvellous little body of ours resting.

Chapter 5

Onanya, *Meraya* and *Yobe*: how *dietas* used to be

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***Onanya, Meraya* and *Yobe*: How *dietas* used to be**

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Introduction
"How *dietas* used to be"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

This chapter offers a more autobiographical focus on José's life and learnings. Travelling with him through his apprenticeship journey from the age of 7, we hear about the challenges of the traditional method of doing *dietas*, firstly in his community of origin and then within an urban context. José explores here the difficulties of combining life in the city and doing *dietas*, complying with the restrictions, and regularly attending secondary school.

The words José uses to tell us about his interactions with the *curanderos* who have "given him *dietas*" open up worlds. *Dietas* are given, received, they are cut and crossed. The *onanya* give them. Patients and apprentices receive them. To end a *dieta* you have to cut it. And when you don't respect a *dieta*, it gets crossed. The *dietas* received can be strong *dietas* and delicate *dietas*. Each apprentice has to experience their *dietas* and according to the learning they obtain during these *dietas* and according to the plants used to do the *dieta*, this process is converted into "their *dieta*", in the singular, something which they carry in their body, in their breath, in their chants and which will become part of them both physically and emotionally, mentally, energetically and spiritually. The *onanya* talk about "their *dieta*" to indicate the root of their know-how, the centre of their integrity as *curanderos* and a space for permanent collaboration with the plants.

The events that José shares enable us to sense the way in which he learned to respect the plants within his own *dietas*, thanks to "*pruebas*" and "crosses of *dieta*". The "crossing of *dietas*" appear as moments which call upon the proficiency of the experts to "straighten" or "align" the "crossed *dietas*". These are the stories of

incredulous young people and of elders who rebuke them, of young people who learn how much it hurts to cross a *dieta* and therefore how they come to feel the strength of the *dieta*, that both the *onanya* elders and the plants in the *dieta* are sharing with them. Through these narratives, we discover how the different plants imply different *dietas*, restrictions and learnings. We also see the way in which both the plants and the *onanya* uncles and elders show José their power and lead him to understand the possible depths of this learning.

The "crossed *dieta*" or the "crossing of the *dieta*" brings us face to face with the pharmakon inherent in this medicine, that is to say its potential ambivalence: that which heals can also make us ill. This invites us to also think about the need for this ambivalence and its transformative power. As we will see not only in this chapter but also in successive dialogues, crossing a *dieta* is narrated in different ways. The cross can occur when the person who is doing the *dieta* does not respect the restrictions of the *dieta* or the post-*dieta* (when they eat something that they should not eat or do something that they should not do). The restrictions can vary according to the plants, according to the instructions of the *onanya* who gives the *dieta* and also according to the patient's treatment or the apprentice's level of learning. However, the intensity of the crossing depends on the plant that has been "crossed" and on how that plant reacts to the crossing. In any case, it can be said that a crossing happens when the plant in the *dieta* "attacks" or "punishes" the patient because it has perceived a lack of respect. The reaction of the plant also depends on the way in which the person has crossed: voluntarily or without realising, for the first time or repeating the same kind of mistake.

During these narratives, apprentice-José is in a process of experimenting and understanding how the consequences of a crossed *dieta* manifest themselves and how difficult it can be to "align it". One of the events narrated, shows that respect for the restrictions can be relative and situational. The way in which the plants react within the restrictive rules is intelligent and situational. This is made apparent in a very eloquent way in the story of how

one of José's uncles, who knew about plants, demonstrates his ability to heal by giving him a "chanted beer" which cures him of a strong stomach ache, caused by having crossed his *dieta*, by drinking that very thing: a glass of beer. Crossing a *dieta* is seen here to be eased by something which references and reuses the very way in which José crossed the *dieta*: namely drinking some beer. At the same time, the story shows us that it was possible for the uncle to put an *ícaro* into an alcoholic drink, prohibited by the *dietas*. This prohibition is therefore shown to be a situational restriction, rather than an absolute antagonist to a *dieta*, or a generalised norm. While in one context, namely José's post-*dieta*, a glass of beer was sufficient to cross his whole *dieta* and make him ill for a length of time, on the other hand, a similar glass of beer could have an "*ícaro* chanted to it" by his uncle and become a medicinal remedy. Although "putting an *ícaro*" into a vegetable remedy and then giving it to drink is a common healing practice in this traditional medicine, putting an *ícaro* into a beer implies an exceptional level of paradox. José tells us that this same uncle knew how to heal "with pure water and chanting". This enables José to insist on the fact that taking ayahuasca is not the central part of his medicine practice and he explains it based on the way he has come to understand it. It was this event that made José decide to return to doing his *dieta*, to align his previous *dietas* and continue learning.

We also learn that the "apprenticeship *dietas*" can entail a radical confrontation with death. In relation to this, José narrates some highly serious events: two road accidents in which he was the only survivor, and the deaths of his two cousins who, like him and together with him, had begun to receive their *dietas* as children from the same grandfather. Through these events, we can see the difficulty of recognising the ways in which the plants communicate, the ways in which the plants punish when they are crossed and also the risks in a *curandero's* work.

The death of one of José's cousins, an *onanya*, shows us the meaning of "needing protections in order to heal" and at the same time introduces us to clashes of strength and knowledge, "attacks" that take place between *curanderos*. Thinking about these clashes

as a binary difference between "good *curanderos*" and "bad *brujos*" does not take into account the ethical subtlety and social responsibility which affect both. Learning to help also implies knowing how to harm. In the same way that the plants can heal or harm, those who work with plants can act in an ambivalent way. If the "crossed *dieta*" showed the ambivalence, or pharmakon, of this medicinal practice and of the plants, the question of the ambivalence of the experts expands this idea even further.

Noting the difference between protection and attack leads us to the notion of "integrity" and to the alliances, demands and pacts which sustain José's medicine. But the notion of integrity is also extended to the plants. The plants also have their integrity, and this integrity is manifested in the "*pruebas*" that the plants give. The plants' integrity does not imply a choice between good and bad, but instead the commitment to put the patients "to the test". The *pruebas* present themselves as difficulties but also opportunities for each person to evolve, learn and heal themself.

"I WORKED, I DID *DIETA* AND I STUDIED"

Your apprenticeship began in your community, in Roaboya, some 6 hours by boat from Pucallpa, along the Ucayali river, with your grandfather who was a meraya, *and then, when he died, you moved to the city of Pucallpa, and you continued doing* dietas *and learning in the city; what was that change and the journey of* dietas *like for you?*

I grew up in the community until I was twelve years old. My mum was already living in the city with my siblings when I came to live in the city. I started to do *dieta* when I was 7 years old, more or less, and I went to the city when my grandfather died. My grandmother, who lived in the community, was still alive, but she was bringing up about 20 grandchildren, and so I moved to be with my mum. And in the city, I started doing *dieta* with the oldest member of a very well-known family of Shipibo *curanderos*. This

elder was really old. When I was 12 years old, I started secondary school in Pucallpa and, at the same time, I was doing *dieta*. When I was 17, I stopped doing my *dietas*. Between the age of 12 and 17 it was really difficult for me: being in secondary school and doing *dietas* at the same time was complex. I mean, I worked, I did *dieta*, and I studied. And most of all, it was difficult because of food, there were days that I didn't eat, I slept, because there wasn't anything left to eat and because of the smell of all the foods that they sell in the city, and because of the behaviours of my classmates at school. It was really difficult to endure it and to keep going. And each time the *dieta* lasted for a year. With this elder, in the city, I did three *dietas*: each one lasted a year, and I did the last *dieta* when I was 17 years old with one of my uncles, but a distant uncle, who has also passed away now.

"There were only three weeks left before the cutting of the *dieta* and I crossed it!"

There was one time I was gripped by fear, in the last *dieta* with the elder that I got to know here in the city. I was about 15 years old. He had given me a year of *dieta*, and I had been doing the *dieta* for 11 months and one week; there were only three weeks left before I could cut (stop) the *dieta*, and I crossed it, by drinking alcohol! One glass. I lasted that night until 3 in the morning and then I drank one glass, and that was enough to cross the *dieta*. I lost the whole *dieta*. The next time I took ayahuasca was my first horrible experience, really horrible … it was as though that crossed *dieta* wanted to take me off course. I didn't want to know anything more about ayahuasca; I shouted, and I was crying, "I want to die! I can't go on!". I couldn't come out of the *mareación* for 3 days and I was ill for about half a year. The elder was in Europe at that time, and he only arrived a week after I had become ill. He told me that the plants had punished me and that I had to do *dieta* again to

come out of it, but I didn't want to know because I was ill. I was really bad. And from that time on I became afraid of ayahuasca.

"I DIDN´T KNOW THAT HIS *DIETA* WAS SO STRONG"

The family of Shipibo *curanderos* that I was doing the *dieta* with, took ayahuasca almost every day. They only rested on Saturdays and they had a lot of patients, both gringos and mestizos, people who came from different places because the elder was really good. I liked the way that he healed. He healed like my grandfather José, he had the same technique, and I was really keen to learn that. But I didn't know that his *dieta* was so strong, and, to tell the truth, it took me about 10 years to come out of that place of fear. That is how I learned about what a *prueba* is like, about the strength of ayahuasca and about when you cross a *dieta*. I was traumatised; I thought that if I took ayahuasca, I would be gripped by that fear again. And so, I didn't take ayahuasca for 2 years.

"YOU NEED TO HAVE YOUR *DIETA* WELL STRAIGHTENED"

The elder went to Iquitos to work with his son and I stayed in Pucallpa and that is when this distant uncle said to me: "you are ill, you need to have your *dieta* well straightened. The elder is maybe angry with you because you have crossed but you yourself have not let him straighten you properly, because he was chanting to you and you were going off to eat things you shouldn't" and I replied: "yes, how do you know that?"

"I AM SEEING YOU" HE SAID TO ME

"I am seeing you" he said to me, and he also said "I am going to teach you, I will align you, but I also need your support, I want you to comply with this because if you don't support me, if I can't straighten you out … I know that it will go badly for you. You have great knowledge within, your own grandfather left it to you and you have to align it. Don't go thinking that you are going to be aligned in one or two years, with time you will explore this knowledge". And I didn't want to. I said to him,
"ah, uncle, I don't want to do *dietas* anymore".
"how old are you?" he asked me.
He was a distant uncle, you could say, but he really loved my mum, and so he invited me.
"Come on, we are going to take ayahuasca" he would say to me. I would reply,
"I don't want to".

Back then I was working as a musician, and in other jobs as well. And one day I travelled to Puerto Maldonado to do some work, not anything to do with ayahuasca, to do some recordings with the *cándamo*[94] and I took ayahuasca there, not because I wanted to, but because there were gringos there and they asked me, and I wanted to earn some money. So, I took it, but I was afraid and of course I had a very bad experience, and I was even more afraid. I was ill again for two months; they had to bring me home by plane. My mum paid for the ticket, and I arrived half dead, and that was when my uncle said; "Blimey! What have you got yourself into, when you are not yet well-enough prepared?"

[94] A group of musicians.

He started to tell me off instead of healing me. He was like that. And I was crying out in pain; I couldn't stand the pain. My mum took me to someone to give me an injection for the infection, but the pain got worse, I couldn't eat anything, if I ate meat or anything I shouldn't, the pain would come back again, until my uncle made the pain go away.

"He didn´t need to give you plants, he healed you with mere water. He had done good *dietas*. He gave you water and he chanted to you, and he healed you"

I will tell you how it happened. My uncle came at new year, everybody was drunk, my mum and my sisters as well. Everyone except me. And he said to me,
"Hey *loco*, what are you doing there?".
"Ah, I'm the DJ".
And why are you not having a drink?"
"I'm sick, uncle, I've been like this for three months", I told him, "it has gone away now, but when I eat a tomato, or I eat cucumber, it comes back again, and I can't. I only drink water".
"Yes, you are skinny" he said, "I thought you were doing a *dieta*".
"No" I said, "I am in pain". And he said to me,
"what time is it?"
"Five in the morning".
My sister was selling beer there, that was her business. And my uncle said to her,
"give me a warm beer".
"OK uncle", she replied. He was a really good *curandero*, a great one; he didn't need to give you plants, he healed you with mere

water. I had done a *dieta* with him. He gave you water, he chanted to you, and he healed you.[95] And he asked me,
"do you trust me?" He was drunk too.
"Yes" I told him.
"Ok then! You are going to drink this beer now".
"But uncle, don't be nasty, you're going to kill me. If I drink water and it hurts me, what will happen if I drink beer?"
"No! Just drink it", he told me.

"He took his glass, and he chanted me an *ícaro* into it"

"First of all, I am going to chant an *ícaro*[96]" he said.
He took his glass, and he chanted me an *ícaro* into it. And he said to my sister,
"turn the music down, we are going to heal this *loco*".
And my mum came then and said,

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[95] This is one moment in this text that makes explicit the relative role of "taking plants" or "taking ayahuasca" within healing processes, and above all the abilities of the *curandero*. A good *curandero*, who has done a good *dieta*, does not need to give a person a plant to drink in order to heal them, nor do they have to drink a plant themselves. Chanting is instead at the centre of the expert's healing intervention.

[96] This refers to "putting an *ícaro*" into the beer. *Icaros* can be "put" into different liquids, such as ayahuasca and other plant preparations, but also into floral essences (flower waters) and also into woven fabrics, especially those which include *kéné*, the traditional Shipibo motifs which can be embroidered or painted. These preparations or fabrics are therefore said to be "chanted" (with an ícaro by a specific *curandero*). In a traditional context, ayahuasca is always "chanted". It is chanted during its preparation and once again before being taken. Ayahuasca therefore becomes the vehicle for the *curandero* or *curandera's* strength, medicine and *dietas,* via the *ícaro*. It could be said that the *ícaro* in some ways synthesizes or intertwines the abilities of the *onanya* and their relationships with the plants they have done *dieta* with. The effectiveness of ayahuasca is understood in an Indigenous context as being completely linked to how it is prepared and chanted. Indeed, ayahuasca does not have an effect "in itself" or more precisely the effect of an ayahuasca preparation without an *ícaro* can be uncontrollable, unpredictable and even harmful. A *curandero* or *curandera's ícaro* "puts" the medicinal and healing intention into the ayahuasca. We note here that *kené* and its relationship with ayahuasca were recognised as cultural heritage in Peru in 2008. On this subject, see the article by Luisa Elvira Belaunde: "Diseños materiales e inmateriales: la patrimonialización del Kéné Shipibo-Konibo y de la ayahuasca en el Perú" https:// centroderecursos.cultura.pe/es/registrobibliogra co/dise%C3%B1os-materiales-e-inmateriales-lapatrimonializaci%C3%B3n-del-ken%C3%A9-shipibo.

"What are you doing? He's got a bad stomach". My mum didn't want me to drink it.
"No!", I said to her. And he started to chant.
"That's it, now, drink" he said.
"Really?", I said. "Yes", he said to me, "just drink". So, I drank. Honestly, within five minutes it sent me to the bathroom with vomit and diarrhoea. I came back out, and he asked me,
"how are you?". "I'm not in pain any more", I replied.
"Drink some more beer then." And from there we carried on drinking until midday, I think.

"I CANNOT GIVE YOU A *DIETA* JUST LIKE THAT, BECAUSE MY *DIETA* IS STRONG AND IF YOU CROSS IT, YOU COULD DIE"

Since then, I have not had that stomach problem again, right up to now. Hopefully it will stay that way. And as he had healed me, I went looking for him because I wanted to learn from him. "OK", he said, "I cannot give you a *dieta* today, in 3 months' time I can give you a *dieta*, go and really think about it. I cannot give you a *dieta* just like that, because my *dieta* is strong and if you cross it, you could die, because I'm really going to give it to you. I am going to open up what your own grandfather gave you, and what the other elder gave you and I am going to straighten you out". That is the way he talked, the way he expressed himself. "But you have to really think about it; prepare yourself well, really think about it and come back in 3 months' time". I was 16 years old. I had crossed the *dieta* when I was 15. I thought that he was going to give me a *dieta* for a year, but he gave it to me for a year and a half. There was no fasting. But as there wasn't much to eat back then, I had to fast anyway. I did that *dieta* well. And shortly afterwards I started to feel confident again, to chant better, to have visions again. The fears had gone. I liked it again, and that is how I have been since then, right up until today.

"I can heal them, because I have different knowledge"

Did your mum never give you dieta*?*

No. I have only done a *dieta* with my mum as reinforcement, like charging my batteries. I have learned with other people. As my mum is teaching my sisters, when my mum feels bad, is under attack or gets ill, they also feel bad because they are part of her line. On the other hand, when I worked with them and they felt bad, I was ok. That is why I can heal them, because I have different knowledge. That is how it works. Because if I was in the same line as them, it would be different. That is also why I have a lot of different chants, because I have learned from different lines. My sisters started to do *dietas* when I was already 18 or 19 years old. They were already married, but my mum had given them her knowledge, her breath, and I remember that within 8 months they were chanting. It was hard work for me to chant, I started chanting when I was 15 years old; it took me 8 years doing *dietas*. It wasn't until after I finished the *dieta* with my uncle that I started chanting well.

"That is when I understood that you don´t play around with those kinds of strong trees"

After you were 17 years old did you only do dietas *as reinforcement?*

No, I had to go back to doing *dieta* when I was 26 years old. I wanted to do a *dieta* with a strong tree because I wanted to have strength and protection. My role in the family was to fight against the *shitana*[97] darknesses and for that reason I wanted to do a *dieta* with *ayahuma*[98]. I didn't know when I did that *dieta*, that life was going to give me a son and afterwards another son. Because when you do a *dieta* with these strong trees you cannot be near your children, and even less so when they are very young. It was not planned, ideally, I wanted to have a child when I was 30 years old, when I had finished that *dieta*, but it happened in the way it did, and that is when I understood that you don't play around with those kinds of strong trees.

I was still in the energy of the *dieta*, and I was sceptical. When my son was born, I wanted to touch him, because he was born almost dead, and I wanted to help him, and they said to me "don't touch him for 4 days" but I didn't take any notice. I went and I hugged him when he was 3 days old and when he was 18 days old, he became ill. He didn't stop vomiting and he was poorly for a long time. Then, when he was 4 years old, he became ill again in the same way. That was when an elder, who has also now died, came and said to me,

"you have done a *dieta* with *ayahuma*",
"Yes" I answered him.
"But have they told you what this means?",
"Yes" I said.
"And why have you done that then? If your son dies, you will be a great *brujo* because this kind of plant asks for a magical pact,[99] that

[97] The word *shitana* describes here a kind of harm caused by *brujería* which requires the necessary competence to counter the *brujería*. Often this kind of ability is accompanied by the idea of a clash of powers and knowledge, often between plant experts, but also other kinds of experts, and in ways that go beyond this kind of confrontation. A *shitana* can also arise from a lack of respect for entities and/or places inhabited by non-human forces or protectors.

[98] *Couroupita guianensis* (Lecythidacae).

[99] The notion of a "magical pact" can be understood here as a form of "damnation", of a "dark pact" like a power acquired by sacrificing an innocent. In this case, the elder says to José that the tree he has done a *dieta* with is susceptible to proposing this kind of "pact".

is why an ayahuma *dieta* implies not touching your child". And I started to understand this more deeply. And so, I got on my knees and begged him.
"For goodness' sake, save my son!" He said to me:
"Why have you done this? They told you not to. Do you not believe in this? Is it the child's fault?" He said a thousand things to me, and I sat there with my son in my arms receiving the *ícaro* and the telling off that the elder gave me and I said,
"OK, never again, you are right!" It was really serious. When the elders spoke, they spoke about those things, but I never listened. I thought "that isn't true, how could a thing like that be true?"

As a young man I did these things, but I was sceptical.

When nothing was happening to me, I thought: "ah, what does it matter!"

But when it happens to you, that is when you start respecting.

"INTEGRITY IS SOMETHING HIDDEN. THE WAY IN WHICH THE PLANTS TEACH YOU AND DEMAND FROM YOU BELONGS TO A DIFFERENT KIND OF INTEGRITY, DIFFERENT FROM RESPECTING AND COMPLETING A PROGRAM"

You are telling us how learning, doing a dieta*, is at the same time about recognising and facing* pruebas *and also about making mistakes and correcting them. Making a mistake also serves to verify what the elders say, or the* maestros *and* maestras*. That is how a space starts to open up in which trust and respect for the plants and the* maestros *is confirmed and built.*

What you learn from the *pruebas* and from the *dietas* are the roots of your integrity. Integrity is something hidden; I only know what I feel and where it comes from. It is sometimes difficult for other people to understand, it is like there is an internal part and an external part of the work. The external part is my ceremonies, when you hear me chanting beautifully, you see me healing. The internal part is how I keep my *dieta* firmly in place, it is what I have to do to be well within my *dietas*, to take care of my integrity, which is also something I have to do to be able to heal, they are the secrets that enable me to have good results. It is as though there were two worlds; there are the people over on this side, with whom I eat, converse, and live, and those over on the other side, those who I connect with in my work. The way in which the plants teach you and demand from you belongs to a different kind of integrity, different from respecting and completing a program.

"The integrity of the plant that teaches you is the *prueba* that she puts upon you"

A plant which heals requires respect and integrity from the *curandero*. Plants give *curanderos* messages as well as *pruebas*, and both appear according to what is needed in a healing, so that we know how to react and how to go in deeply. The messages come to us from the world of the plants and the gringo world does not understand this, it would seem that for them sticking to a plan is more important than listening to the messages. At times I have lost work because I had to respect and take care of my integrity with the plants, even though I lost face with humans. I prefer to disappoint people than to cross my *dieta*, I am talking about neglecting my integrity with the plants. I will give you an example: I have decided not to establish a fixed program in *Shipibo Rao* exactly because I have to listen to and respect the messages that come to me in each

ceremony: the patients know that there will be five ceremonies, but they do not know when they will take place because I have to listen to the messages. This does not happen in the gringo lodges: they do not listen to the messages there, and nor do they listen to the *curandero*. There, they simply define a program that has to be completed at a time and in a way that pleases the patient, who is accustomed to things occurring according to how they have been agreed: if what the *curandero* said previously is not fulfilled, this will be seen as a lack of integrity towards them, the patients. However, in these cases, they are neglecting the integrity of the *curandero* with the plants. This has happened to me often. I will be even more specific: let's suppose that the plants tell me that the sauna, or flower bath[100], must be done on a really sunny day. But on the day that the bath, or sauna, is programmed, if it is cloudy, I have to reprogram it, above all because if I don't, the bathing will not have the desired effect. You have to understand that it is they, the plants, who are healing, and that is why it is crucial to listen to their messages, even if you "lose face", or the plans "change" with humans. If, as a *curandero*, you do not comply with the messages from the plants, they will simply not come the next time you call them. Nowadays, as well as taking care of their integrity with the plants, *curanderos* sometimes, due to a commitment to gringo lodges, are also forced to restrict themselves within fixed, unmoveable programs, because, according to the gringo, any change means a lack of respect towards them.

"Because I didn't pay attention to the messages..."

[100] Flower baths can be both hot and cold. They imply a preparation of water with either boiled plants or macerated plants. When they are hot, they are a form of individual steam bath. When they are cold, the cold mixture is poured individually over the whole body and then left to try slowly. They are prepared and given by the *onanya*. Chanting medicinal songs can be part of the practice.

Often during ayahuasca I have seen myself dead. My body lying there. And I have nearly died twice. Or rather, I don't know how I didn't die. And that happened because I didn't pay attention to the messages. The first time was when my mum said to me:

"I have seen something bad related to you in the medicine, I have seen you naked" and I said to her,
"I have also had a dream: I looked rough, and I was asking you for clothes",
"Well, then, let's take medicine together". I had a trip to Cusco planned for three days ahead. And so, we took ayahuasca, without patients. In the vision I saw myself walking along, and a really big tree fell in my path, and I could hear people asking for help, and then a dog barked and that brought me out of the vision[101] and my mother said to me,
"don't go, I can feel that something is going to happen to you".

And I could also feel it, but I needed to work to get some money because my mum and I were building a house and so I travelled to Cusco. When I arrived, I called my mum to tell her that all was well and after four months of working there, I decided to go back by bus, and I had a really serious accident. A head-on crash between two buses because of the fog. I was 19 years old; I was sitting up at the front on seat number 3, and I don't know how I didn't die. I was thrown off the bus. Everyone else died. I had a girlfriend at that time, a Spanish woman, and she died as well.

It was like being in a dream. I woke up in hospital. I could feel all the people who had died in my family coming towards me. I was on a kind of hanging bridge. On one side was my living family and on the other side, my dead family. And they were waiting for me. They made me see lots of things. They made me laugh. And then I woke up in hospital, and I realised that everyone on the bus had died.

[101] This refers to a loss of concentration within a vision experienced with ayahuasca

The second time was a plane accident and the same thing happened. I was 25 years old, some 5 years later and I knew more about ayahuasca then, I knew how to interpret better. I had said to my uncle before he died, "I think things will go badly for me on this trip, I am dreaming the same thing as I was dreaming when I had the accident" and he said to me: "come and heal yourself" and I didn't go; I was working as a musician and I had some work that had been paid in advance, to go to Contamana and play for a group of foreigners. And it happened again, on the way there all went well, I went on the motor boat but on the way back I went on a small plane and the same thing happened: everyone died except me. It was raining and a bolt of lightning hit the wing. We were not flying very high, and we landed next to a river. I fainted when it happened and the really strange thing is that in that area there are a lot of jaguars and snakes, and when they smell blood, they go in for the kill. I don't understand why they didn't eat me, because none of the bodies of the rest of the people who had died were found whole. Some bodies were not even found at all. After that I was really shocked. I was traumatised. I didn't want to travel, either by bus or plane. I couldn't sleep either, because in my dreams a moment would come where something smashed and everyone was shouting and everything was falling. The plane crash was more terrifying because of the falling; people shouting, "we are going to die here!", which was different to the bus accident, when I was asleep, as that happened at night. The cries woke me up, but I wasn't in pain. But after the plane accident I kept having thoughts about why I hadn't died … why did I survive? Why did I not die?"

"I WENT INTO *DIETA* FOR SIX MONTHS AND HAPPILY I MANAGED TO GET OUT OF THERE"

After that I was ill for three months and then, I went into *dieta* for six months and happily I managed to get out of there. I am

no longer afraid of travelling, nor am I afraid of death. If I am afraid of anything it is of something happening to my children and now, I take more notice of the messages. For example, during Covid times, I didn't want to go to Europe, I felt that something was going to happen. I was dreaming about horrible things, not really horrible, but I knew that something was going to happen. And it did happen. Again, on the way back, I got stuck in Brazil, and I watched so much television I got scared and just then I also got a fever, and my mind was saying to me "what if I die here? They could throw me into any old hole". I was in Río Branco, and I didn't want to tell the hotel receptionist that I had a fever, I stayed in my room, and I didn't eat; it was like being in a dream, like a film. And then I managed to get on a fast bus, it was supposed to take a day, and it took six. And that is how it happens, I see that I shouldn't do something, but in order to please someone, I don't think about myself and soon afterwards I have problems. I think about what people will think, or what they will say about me if I don't do what they expect of me. Sometimes, even if it is about something really big, the plants let me know with an insignificant message, and I only realise after it has already happened. That is why when I have a vision now, I take notice of it.

"These severe things happen to me because I heal people"

My mum says,
"if you just healed with saunas and bathing and love chants, these things
wouldn't happen to you,
but when you get involved in the dark stuff, darkness will come looking for you".

These severe things happen to me because I heal people. I know how to look after my family, but these things happen to me because I take care of others and also because of my stubbornness, which makes me always want to go into things more deeply. This is partly a strength. But if I didn't go in deeper, these things wouldn't happen to me. As my mum says and she is totally right, "You go right in, without thinking about what could happen to the people around you, and because you go right in it covers you up. But the good thing is that you know how to get out again. But you get out when they have already touched you, when you have already become sick, when you have already lost. And just at that point you get out".

That is why you have to go in first to clean the air. If it were a really old tree, first of all you'd have to cut off its leaves, then its branches and then its roots. "But you go in directly to the root because you want to do things quickly" she says to me, "you want the person to heal quickly. That is your style because that is how they have taught you, you know different ways to us, you work more on the spiritual part and the energetic part, but that is more dangerous for the people around you because if you only healed with saunas and bathing and love chants, these things wouldn't happen to you, but you get involved in the dark stuff and the darkness comes looking for you".

That is why I continue doing a *dieta* with a *maestro*, my current *maestro*, to keep learning how to manage that.

"Doing *dieta* is a way of cleaning yourself, of valuing yourself, but with a different kind of value. The value of knowing what your real strength is"

Some years ago, my son almost died, and that is why I don't take my sons or my wife (who doesn't have a *dieta*) to places

where there are other *curanderos*. Because here in the Amazon region, if you, as a *curandero*, want to do something, there will always be someone who is envious. And if you don't have protection, as much as you would like to get ahead, you won't be able to. You will always get stuck. But if you have a *dieta*, little by little you will push through and do it. The amount of time it takes doesn't matter; it is a way of cleaning yourself, of valuing yourself, but with a different kind of value, the value of knowing what your real strength is. So that might take a while, but it will turn out well. It is a non-violent strength, a strength to keep walking, like an engine installed inside us, and we have these techniques here, this knowledge, to help us find this strength. We have it so close to us, but we don't value it. I have learned that from my mum, how many grandchildren does she have, and nobody in her family wants to learn this, so, where is this great knowledge going to end up? Maybe it will end here. What a waste! None of her grandchildren have approached her and said to her: "heal me, teach me". This is really sad.

"That is how we are losing the elders' wisdom"

The new generations are doing other things, I sometimes say to myself, what a shame that I wasn't born the same year as my older brother! That way I could have spent more time with my grandfather. By the time I got to the age of reason, he had died.

It was decided in the community that one of us was going to be a *meraya*, one an *onanya* and the other a *yobe*

In the community where I lived, there were three cousins, and I was one of those cousins. And it was decided in the community that one of us was going to be a *meraya*, one an *onanya* and the other a *yobe*, and as a child, I was chosen to learn to be a *yobe*. A

yobe is the warrior, the guardian. And they choose you to be a *yobe* because supposedly you have a good heart and your *dieta* is going to grow with this strength directed towards goodness. They choose you to be a *meraya* because you are a quiet type, intelligent and sensitive; they name you an *onanya* because you like looking after other people and also if you have had experiences of suffering that allow you to better understand those who suffer. In this work, the *meraya* is the one who brings information, the one who feeds the people, the one who knows what to do so that there is abundant food, and animals when they go to hunt. The *onanya* is the *curandero*: the one that heals, the one that helps; the community doctor. You could say that the *meraya* is the scientist; the *onanya* is the doctor and the *yobe* is the army.

My cousin who had been chosen to be a *meraya*, died when he was 14 years old because he crossed his *dieta*, he had been doing a *dieta* for 3 years and he crossed his *pona*[102] *dieta*. He started to writhe around while we were playing football, he vomited blood, and he died right there and then. And it was because he had seen a girl fall over who was carrying plantains and he went to blow smoke on her with his pipe, but the girl had her period, and he didn't know. The elder was travelling, and by the time he got to the place where we were playing, the kid had already died. Three days later the girl told us that he had blown smoke on her.

The other cousin, the one who was going to be an *onanya*, died 7 years ago. He was living in the city, he was very careless, he got drunk all the time. He would heal, they would pay him, and he would go off to drink. He was always fighting with his wife. Every time he fought with his wife, he would turn to the drink. One day a woman who had been affected by strong *brujería* asked him for help. He started to heal her, and they say that the man (who had done the *brujería*) killed him in the middle of the ceremony.

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[102] *Socratea Exorrhiza (Arecaceae)*

"Because I wanted to be a good *yobe*... one that doesn´t go looking for revenge"

The wife of that cousin of mine who was an *onanya* says that "they had closed him up". He was chanting well, at the beginning of the ceremony, then he began to feel bad, he wanted to blow *soplo* and there was no *soplo*. His body became hard, and he said he could feel knives being driven into his throat. "I want to vomit, and I feel like I'm going to vomit glass" he said. He asked his wife for water and when she came back with the water, he had already fallen to the ground. Another *curandero* blew *soplo* on him, but he died anyway. It happened in Cantagallo, in Lima. I knew him well. We worked together; he was really well known. He had a lot of work. He would get us clients; we used to go to Cuzco together. I started doing this work with gringos with him. He was a really great *curandero* for about 7 years. He healed with *copaiba*[103], with *sangre de grado*[104] as well, and he could heal with mere water. I only worked as a guardian for him. He healed people. He was a really good person, he used to invite me to eat good food, he would give me money for my family, he taught me stuff. Firstly, we would take the money to the family and then we would go out and drink beers. He looked after me, he was a really good person but then he met his wife, and then everything was different. She expected him to pay me less, and she didn't like it when I went to their house. And so, I distanced myself. Afterwards I heard the news that he had died in Lima and that they were bringing him back to Pucallpa. I never looked into how he had died, because I wanted to be a good *yobe*. One that doesn't go looking for revenge.

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[103] *Copaifera O cinalis (Fabaceae).*
[104] *Croton Lechleri (Euphorbiaceae).*

"The *onanya* is the medicine specialist and the *yobe* is the protection specialist, although both know how to heal, and both know how to protect"

We often hear a very radical distinction between "good" curanderos *and "bad"* brujos. *Some people think this is the difference between an "*onanya*" and a "*yobe".

The *onanya* is the medicine specialist and the *yobe* is the protection specialist, although both know how to heal, and both know how to protect, but together they are stronger. It is a collaboration. Their *dietas* are partly different. The *yobe* does a *dieta* to know how to face the darkness, how to defend the healing. But the *yobe* is not "bad" and the *onanya* is not "good". That depends on their deeds.

"We learn wildly"

¿What was it like, learning to be a yobe*, when you were a child?*

Learning to be a *yobe* was hard. My cousin who was going to be an *onanya* was doing a *dieta* nearer to his house. They sent me deep into the forest so that I would learn to face fear. What you have to understand is that we learn wildly, that is to say, we learn like animals learn. The *pruebas* are like insects that bite you and when insects bite an animal a lot, the animal suffers and gets injured, but with time, they heal themselves, their own experience teaches them how to heal themselves and what to use. But nobody else teaches them that. It is like an abandoned deer who has to survive alone. It is a bit like that. I learned on my own, in the sense that I had to go into a world that I didn't know, and I went into those worlds without knowing if it was going to go well or badly for

me. Nobody told me what might happen to me. I think that all the harsh things that happened to me were because of crossed *dietas* or attacks. Surviving two deaths and then being left traumatised was really hard. It was not as though you did a *dieta* with plants, and your food was ready at twelve, like in the modern *dietas*. I use the word "wild" because it is as if you were an abandoned animal who had to learn without anyone explaining. I would like to see experience and explanation combined more. The lack of explanation also meant we were ignorant; they only told us the bad things that could happen if we didn't complete the *dieta*; for example, when a rainbow comes out you shouldn't get out of bed, if you do you will get sick, you will turn yellow … and so we were always learning with this fear. Another example, I said to my grandfather: "I'm afraid grandfather, I can see devils". And he left me alone with that. One week later he said, "are you still afraid?". "Yes" I replied. "Well then, let's go and take medicine". We took the medicine and the fear came again. "Well, go and do a *dieta*" he told me, "next to the cemetery!".

But I was ten years old! And I was so afraid of the *chacra*[105] cemetery! It was all dark, I didn't sleep for two weeks; any sound an animal made, I would sit bolt upright. And they never explained anything to you, about the *pruebas* that would come. They didn't know how to talk about it, they just told you what to do... and I was afraid that an animal would eat me up. So, I didn't leave the *tambo*[106], because sweat would entice the animals too. The elders would just say, "trust, the spirits are protecting you". But it was scary, although the fear of crossing the *dieta* was worse; that was also what made you stick to the *dieta*.

[105] A farmed area of land.
[106] A hut on stilts.

"Knowing how to confront the darkness is not about doing harm. It is like using a mirror: so that the others see themselves reflected"

Could we say that learning to be a yobe *is learning to face fear more than learning to do harm?*

"Doing harm is much quicker than learning how to heal", my grandfather used to say. If you do harm, your strength comes from harm and if you don't pay for it here physically, you will pay for it further beyond, and your children will pay for it here. The power of darkness is strong and runs the world; it is the *bulto* of the world. Those who do harm are in their dark world; they think that they are doing good things for their people, like having money for their family or community, or for everyone who they give money to or buy things for, and they want to be "the super-man" among their people and that is how they justify the harm they do to others, but knowing how to confront the darkness is not about doing harm, it is like using a mirror so that the others see themselves reflected. And that is how you take their power away. The *yobe* can work as a guardian for the *onanya*. For example, my mum is an experienced *onanya*, she knows the plants very well, how to heal with the plants, not only energetically, but also through the preparation of remedies. She knows how to heal ovaries, all other parts of the body and she knows how each plant can heal. She passed this knowledge to my sisters. One of my sisters also learned with my uncle, but all three are in the same line, and so when there are attacks against my mum, the three of them are affected but as I learned from others, I have other knowledge and I have done *yobe dietas*, so when there are attacks, I am not affected. I can protect them. That is how it works. When I left my community and I started to do *dietas* in the city, I received *onanya dietas* there and I developed the healing part more.

During the apprenticeship process, you have to learn how to gain knowledge, but without using it for revenge or to do harm"

The plants have two sides, you have said many times, a light side and a dark side. And while they are learning, an onanya *and a* yobe *also learn about these two sides. So, how do you learn to distinguish healing from "doing harm"?*

What happens is that during the apprenticeship you have to learn to gain knowledge, but without using it for revenge or to do harm. For example, at school some of the kids teased me, and a desire to punish them entered my mind, the desire to send them something so that they would get sick or so that they would never go back to the school ever again.

And when I was 9 years old, I had a kind of vision while taking ayahuasca. There was a kind of big cemetery, really big, full of darkness and I could see names etched there, like on a wall. It was a boy that showed me, because usually when you are doing new *dietas* it is like a boa has eaten you, or an anaconda, and they have thrown you into a world with a clear vision and someone shows you around, and the boy showed me "these people have killed other people" and right there was the name of an uncle of mine who was a really good *brujo*. In the community everyone was afraid of him, and in my vision, I asked, "are these people who have killed?" And the wall was burning. It was burning all the time. All these walls were smoking, burning, little by little. And he said to me, "is this where you want to end up? Is this where you want to be? Take a good look, when they die, they live as outcasts, their world is cold, they have nowhere to go, nobody wants to be with them.

Afterwards I saw one community here, and another over there. "Come and look, see how the people here live, the people who have done good, they are all drinking water". It was like the life that we live, but more harmonious because there was no money, he just showed me hens and things like that … "But look at the people who have killed". In the vision the boy showed me how they suffered, how they were afraid, how it rained, how it was windy. And how wicked souls live, who have committed serious errors, how they live as outcasts. Some ten years ago, I was talking with some elders. The elder who had given me a *dieta* here in the city also told me the same story. I had not told him about my vision, but he started to tell me the same story and, well, they had also showed the same thing to him when he was a boy and since that time, he had been afraid of doing harm to other people.

It is not that you don't know how to do it, it is rather that you choose which way to navigate. But to navigate in this work you learn both directions, because you can't heal without protecting.

Understanding the *yobe's dieta*, the *yobe's* role, implies an understanding of how *dietas* used to be.

Chapter 6

How the elders used to teach: redesigning forms of protection, defence and attack



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How the elders used to teach: redesigning forms of protection, defence and attack

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"This medicine, with *dietas*, wasn't for women. I don't know if that was about machismo or to protect them. But it wasn't for women " 190

How the elders used to teach"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

The dialogues set out in this chapter open up the old world of the elders and of community life. They enable us to sense the way in which that world has been and is still, in many ways, disappearing.

The conversation begins with a description of the ways in which the elders used to evaluate the work of the apprentices and how they could see what an apprentice had learned. The apprentice had to try to heal, firstly, a child, then an adolescent, then an adult, and finally a person affected by *brujería*. Each test showed the elders the way in which the apprentice needed to keep doing *dieta*. They paid attention to the strength of the chant, a strength the elders looked at in order to know and feel how the apprenticeship was going. "*Everything that is received is energy and knowledge*" José tells us, indicating the particularities of this strength. He also describes how this strength is the last remaining tool when a struggle becomes really difficult within an ayahuasca *mareación*.

Healing *brujería* is the hardest test. José describes *brujería* as illnesses which have an "owner" or a "guardian" or a "mother". *Brujería* is therefore analogous with plants that heal and teach, which also have a "mother" or "owner" and can also do harm. Having the ability to find and confront these forces which defend what they are looking after, is indispensable for a *curandero's* work. This leads the conversation in two directions. On the one hand, we go into greater depth about what it means to fight against these *darknesses*, or *bultos*. Indeed, we return here to the theme of defence and of what it means to be a "good *yobe*" or a good "*brujo*" (given that the term *yobe* tends to be translated or understood as "*brujo*").

On the other hand, the conversation also takes on a more historical focus, related to the importance of "attacks" in local relationships between *curanderos*.

Defence is described as a fight against darkness and against illness. But at the same time, it involves thinking about healing as a way of fighting, that takes care to avoid giving more strength to what is attacking a person or making them ill., It has been important for Jose to learn to distinguish, inside his visions and *ícaros*, two different darknesses. The kind that are indeed "attacks" (or *shitana* in the Shipibo language) in the sense of a purposeful "harm" sent by someone who knows how to work with plants, and those *darknesses* (or *bultos*) that also function as *shitana* but come from "twisted genealogical lines". Nevertheless, the symptoms and the treatments required are similar. José distances himself from understanding *shitana* exclusively as a purposeful and malicious attack from another *curandero*. He describes it as a typically "Indigenous way of thinking" to interpret the fight against the darkness as an "attack", and he questions the origin of the omnipresent logic of "attacks" in local relationships.

In the notion of "gossip" proposed by José, we find a social and historical questioning of colonialism and the way in which the colonial devaluing and demonising of traditional Indigenous knowledgeable men and women has weakened ethnic and intracommunity trust. The historical success of this gossip, this speaking badly of others, this "malediction", would mark the beginning of a deep division that continues to exist today. At times described by his people as an "attack", and at times as a "*prueba*", the dynamics of devaluing women and men experts in traditional medicine is something that tears Shipibo families apart. The introduction of mistrusting traditional knowledgeable men and women also demonstrates their need for their community, for their very existence. José tells us about the way in which communities supported *dieta* processes together, taking care of people who were doing *dieta*, and their families, who had to carry on despite their prolonged periods of absence and isolation. At the same time, José also offers us memories of how the Shipibo People lived in the past:

in communities that were very different to those that exist today, where they are "settled" in small territories which are constantly threatened by extractive companies and by the logics of economic "development". He speaks to us about family groups with matrilocal households that moved around vast territories and had access to lands and rivers that enabled them to live in abundance[107]. José also describes how territorial and economic colonisation continues to run alongside the impact of religious colonisation. What started off as "gifts", namely imported objects or provisions, have now turned into bait that increasingly fascinates young people, distancing them from more traditional ways of life. Harmful dynamics have appeared, apparently without violence or aggression, but which create ignorance about what a *curandero* or *curandera* is; ignorance about what it means to look after and defend a territory, ignorance about the old knowledge. Here we can feel José's sadness in witnessing the disappearance of entire ways of life, territories and the knowledge that used to look after them.

This sadness leads us once again to the centre of what José describes as the "*curandero's* integrity". Here, integrity is described as arising from the ability to continually serve as an example within a community. The *curandero's* capacity to take care of their integrity emerges as a reenacted encounter between their practice and their search for the most appropriate way to help others. The commercialisation of traditional medicine and the "gringo mentality" are specific tests for this integrity. Some *curanderos* and *curanderas* now hold political, representative and honorary positions. José tells us that a *curandero* needs to stay on the margins of social gatherings, but at the same time, he dreams of the possibility that "*the Shipibo political leaders could be a bit more ayahuasquero*", that is to say, a bit closer to the *onanya* and to ancestral wisdom.

[107] In relation to these historical and contemporary dynamics and to their account from a Shipibo perspective, I suggest reading the ethnography by Carlos Suarez Alvarez entitled "La Edad del Desarrollo. Señoritas y muchachos en la selva que se acaba", Libros del Mono Blanco (segunda edición) ISBN 9798353619642

Commercialisation is also accompanied by a "gringo" desire to value the old ways, which sometimes falls into forms of idealisation, exotism and demands, in terms of how an onanya is expected to behave. There are "gringo" expectations, according to which the curandero or curandera should not drink coca-cola or should not charge money for their work. José confronts this idealisation, by describing it as a contemporary form of "colonisation": as a lack of respect for the onanya, who are faced with foreign criteria and are pushed into fulfilling the idealised image that the "gringo" has of traditional knowledgeable men and women.

"How the elders used to recognise mastery"

Understanding the differences between the dietas *of an* onanya *and of a* yobe *implies an understanding of the complementary and collaborative nature of these different learnings and of the ways in which they were recognised by the elders within a community.*

Nowadays, there are people who do *dieta* for 3 or 4 months and they call themselves *curanderos*. Nowadays, as soon as you know how to chant, you can go and chant to gringos. In the past, you had to demonstrate that you had learned to heal. First you had to heal a child, then an adolescent, and then an already advanced illness, and finally a *brujería*. That is how the elders recognised your mastery, or your PhD.

And the *maestros* looked at your strength, the strength of your chanting, the strength of your *soplo* blowing. At that moment the *maestros* did not help. You had to try and do the healing. And it was embarrassing. They would listen to where you were chanting from,[108] and then they would say to you: "well, you have chanted,

[108] This refers to the idea that the ícaro holds the strength, the *dietas*, the living knowledge learned from these practices. Listening to "where you chant from" or "where the *ícaro* surges from" refers to this kind of capacity embodied by the apprentice and "put into the *soplo*" and therefore also into the *ícaro*.

but we see what you are lacking: so, more *dieta*". Then another child would come along: once again they would test you. If you healed them, great, if you didn't heal them, more *dieta*. Then an adolescent would come along. Then an adult with serious traumas, with great errors. And above all, mestizos, because they had more traumas than we Indigenous people. The elders also studied how you were doing after a healing in order to see how you could further your *dieta*. They prohibited you from saying that you already knew how to heal. And finally, the strongest test would come: an illness with an owner[109] and that really was something else, it was double the work: the illness and the owner. And that was the last level. And each time you would go back to doing *dieta* until you could manage it.

When they finally recognised you as an *onanya* (because you could heal people who had been affected by *brujería*) it meant you could stand on your own two feet, and so they gave you work as an assistant. But always as an assistant for starts, never as a *maestro*. "Let's see, you, son, over there, chant to him", or "no son, this one is really serious, I will chant to him. You need more *dieta* for this one". And so, you kept on doing the *dieta* to get more strength. But always as an assistant.

"In the past, most of the good *curanderos* lived alone"

We have spoken about how the onanya *experience the things that are happening to their patients within their own life, with their family members and daily*

[109] Illnesses "with an owner" or "with a mother" or "with a guardian" are also described as *brujería*. We have seen in the chapter on the "*bulto*", the way in which José associates *brujería* with trauma, due to the presence of a "guardian" who protects the cause or the origin of what is making the person ill. This question is also discussed in the introduction and in the glossary.

occurrences. You have also said that a curandero *can feel beforehand the sufferings of those who are about to come to a ceremony or a retreat. And you have shared that this is the hardest part for you, the most horrible part of your work.*

How do you manage this within a community? Does the community help the onanya *or the* meraya *with this? What would be the difference between the past and the present with respect to this?*

It is often said that in the past, most of the good *curanderos* lived alone, without a wife, without children, far away in the forest. And that was the difference between a *curandero* and a *curaca*, that is to say, a community leader. This is wrongly described in some books that I have read, in which they say that a *curaca* is a *curandero*. No. The *curacas* are the chiefs of a community. Because they were the leaders, they had 2, 3, or 4 wives. However, an *onanya*, a *meraya*, could not have as many women because they would have to worry about what could happen to them or to their children. Because when they had a wife or children, they would no longer want to be a *curandero* because they would no longer be focused on themselves, but rather on preventing bad things from happening to their wives and children. They often left their apprenticing because they were afraid that something would happen to their loved ones. It is the same thing with the *kushmas*[110] and the necklaces. *Curanderos* did not wear those things. *Curanderos* were like any other person; they weren't interested in the way they were dressed. When you are in a deep *mareación* with ayahuasca, you even forget all about your pipe and your flower water[111], you are just using your inner strength and the trust you have in who you are and what you know. And all of the knowledge is here, in your heart, connected to the strength that you have inside.

[110] Traditional male dress, which is usually embroidered with traditional Shipibo motifs, or *Kené*.
[111] A pipe and flower water accompany the *onanya's* healing processes. Pipe refers here to the use of local tobacco or mapacho (*Nicotiana rustica*, *Solanaceae*). Flower water can be home-prepared by macerating plants in alcohol, however there is an industrially produced version (Murray & Lanman) which is also used frequently and is recognised as being effective by many Shipibo *onanya*.

We often hear nowadays that ayahuasca gives you your arrow, your crown… These are imaginary things, to fascinate the gringo. I mean, everything that you receive is energy and knowledge. It is not external. Outside you might seem like any other person, even like a tramp, that is what they say here in the rainforest: "here comes that lying tramp of a *curandero*". It is usually the leader of a community that you see well dressed; his wife well made-up, with *achiote*[112] on her lips, a piercing in her nose[113], her necklaces made of metal, of silver.

But a *curandero* has never been a community representative and has never received a mayor. Nowadays they call *curanderos*: "ambassadors of traditional medicine" or "representatives of Shipibo culture". And so, they have to receive the president, the mayor, the person from the regional government, and they have to put on a good spread. It didn't used to be this way: *curanderos* lived in their own space and if they were in the community, they went off to one side, sitting, watching. Without offending anyone. If they wanted to have a drink, they drank it on their own, aside. If there was fighting, they would leave, because they did not want to dishonour their word, they wanted to keep to their word. That is where their integrity was. That is why nowadays, malice and the dark *bulto* has grown among those who take medicine. Because most people no longer practice this way.

"Among indigenous peoples, we call the fight against dark energies "attacks""

Let's talk more about the attacks between curanderos *that are really common in the Amazon region and how this relates to the two aspects of this knowledge: that*

[112] *Bixa Orellana* (*Bixaceae*). The fruits and seeds of this plant give an intense red colour which is used, among other things, as a pigment for the lips.
[113] This refers to the traditional use of a metallic piercing in the form of a ring which is positioned across the central cartilage of the nose.

which cures and that which brings illness, that which liberates and that which attacks.

Among Indigenous peoples, we call the fight against dark energies "attacks". There is jealousy among Indigenous peoples: who knows more, who knows less, or "I know more, he knows less; or I come from this family, he from another". There is something we call "*buman*" in Shipibo. It is a mental power or a psychological power, you could say. It is when you wish someone ill and some days later you hear that they are not well, because you are activating it with your words. That is why when they tell you that someone is talking badly about you, you mustn't act on it. It is better to withdraw because words themselves have actions. And if you have acted on it, the only way of controlling it is to take the medicine again and take all your words out. It is a force of darkness, but it comes from a simple wish. Then there is something we call *shitana* in Shipibo, and that is an action that you actually create with all your strength to put an illness into someone's body, or to put pain into their family or into their lives. These are wicked or malevolent things.

Learning with plants you can see two paths, the good and the bad. The bad path is wider, beautiful and open. And the good path is suffering, I mean, it is a path that is difficult to walk along. Because you know that on a small path you are always going to see snakes, spiders, a tree trunk traversing the path, and when that tree trunk is in the way, you can't walk on, you have to stay there and clear the way, or you have to get sick, and lie in your bed for a while, but you'll carry on. Instead, those who choose a dark path (and I know a lot of people who are in the middle of this) live well and have everything. Because the power of the darkness gives them strength. But there is darkness waiting for them further ahead.

When we have talked about the bulto*, you have made a comparison between attacks that can occur between* curanderos

who have plant knowledge, and intergenerational, ancestral traumas that a person can carry. You had explained that at times they look similar: that a trauma is like a dark energy, that can be very dense and that when a person is the guardian of their own trauma, this can look like an attack to a maestro.

The thing is that this phenomenon of the attacks only happens here, between us. We fight each other. Up to now I haven't done these things. I mean, I know how to do it, I don't deny that, because within this line of work both things are practiced. But you have to stick to goodness. You use the other side when you have to defend yourself, but, even in the case of defence, you have to know how to fight against the darkness, but without giving it more strength, without feeding it. Sometimes, the time you spend fighting against the darkness gives that darkness more strength. As an uncle of mine used to say: "if you have done nothing wrong, son, never fear. If you haven't done negative things or harmed anyone, never be afraid of anything because nothing can do you harm. But if you have done harm to someone, then yes, you should be afraid, because that is where they will grab you. If your conscience is clear, you can shout out, run around in the ceremony, you can say 'I am dying!' but you won't die. Instead you will learn how to get out of there".

And nowadays, there are a lot of people who say a thousand things about me, but it doesn't matter to me. Before, I used to feel sad, especially when this came from my own family, from my friends. But now, when they say to me that I know nothing, I feel happier because if I know nothing, then nobody is going to bother me.

You are talking as though attacks, and people around you speaking badly of you, were the same thing.

That is because "gossip", talking badly about someone, is like a *shitana*. Gossip is humanity's *bulto*. Gossip within a family, a

company, in all environments is the real Covid. Gossip is a pandemic that never dies.

We have been talking about the fact that curanderos always learn the two paths and that that they choose which path they are on with their actions. Actions differentiate a curandero from a brujo. *At the same time, the word* "brujo" *(which is imported, and which is still used today to devalue and demonise your work) does not translate the complexity of the word* "yobe" *in Shipibo, which describes a person who is a specialist in fighting against darkness.*

The *yobe* is the person who learns about the dark side of the plants. There are good and bad *yobe*. It depends on their actions. A "good *yobe*" is very valuable for their community. The *yobe* fought against the dark side, but for his people, in defence of his people. And the elders and *meraya* used to say that when certain illnesses appeared (like yellow fever and many others, illnesses brought in from outside) not everyone died because the *yobe* fought against them. And if there were deaths, only some people from the community would die, but not everyone. In Indigenous terms, we call these things a "plague". The pandemic is also a plague. For example, it might have been that someone had thirty or forty hens, or twenty ducks, and suddenly in three days they had none because all of them had caught a plague or were dead. And so, the *yobe* would defend them. Some of them would die because something had got in, but the *yobe* was the one who fought it, so that it didn't spread.

So that was a good *brujo*, *jakon yobe*[114]. In exchange, a bad brujo, a dark *brujo*, *wiso yobe*, would kill, because of jealousy. The *meraya* didn't have the same strength to defend as the *yobe*, to fight against the darkness. However, a *yobe* learned from really strong trees, trees that have thorns and are poisonous. For example, *lopuna negra*[115], even if it just comes near you, gives you a pretty

[114] *Jakon* is translated literally as "good".
[115] *Ceiba Pentandra, Bombacaceae*

strong energy that shocks you[116]. And you do *dieta* with this plant to learn to be a *yobe*.

When an "*ayahuasquero* who only works to comply with a programme" goes into a *mareación* and something strong and dark comes, he gets stuck there, in fear. However, when you really want to do the work, you face this fear: you look for where to go in and you go there. Once you are in, nobody can move you from there. But when you are not prepared, you confuse things. In the case of these dark loads from the ancestral side that we were talking about (the *bultos*), I myself initially thought that they were *brujería* and that they were attacking me. Because Indigenous mentality creates that thought.

I only learned some three years ago that this is not the darkness of an attack, but the darkness carried by a twisted genealogical line. Obviously, the darkness comes because of the errors that a person has made, but if you don't confront that darkness, you are not going to heal that person. We often work on our own personal self, but we always carry our family traumas as well. And we often say: "but I haven't harmed anyone. Why am I like this? If nothing bad has happened to me, if my parents have been telling me since I was young, that I have always been really loved, super loved. I have worked, studied, this and that; I don't understand why I am like this, where this sadness comes from, this angst that I have, this anxiety to do this or that". That is to say, you live well, but you are never satisfied. You have it all, but that isn't how it feels, you feel an emptiness, you feel this yearning for someone to love you, or someone does love you, but you don't feel good, you don't feel comfortable. You are afraid. You are sad. And that is like *shitana*.

[116] Translators, note: *S*ee Glossary for an explanation of the translation of the Spanish verb "*chocar*" with "to shock" in English.

When you face these darknesses in order to heal, when you go into them, do these "attacks" continue to affect you outside of the ceremonies and in your own life?

Normally, when you pull out these energies from another person during a ceremony, you throw them away, you discharge them, with the *ícaro*. But it can happen that I myself can't get back out and I have to find someone to clean me. When things are put into me (I mean an intention put there by another *curandero*, a *shitana*) I can't clean myself. When they put it there well, (line by line, energy by energy) it grips your mind, body and all your daily life. Like they don't let you breathe. You turn this way and there's a problem, and that way it grips your health; you can't breathe well, you are in pain, you want to faint. When the *shitana* is advanced, it is difficult to get out of there by yourself.

Do you consider these attacks between curanderos*, between those that know about plants, to be something belonging to the Shipibo world or do you see the same thing occurring in other Indigenous groups?*

In the other groups I know a little, I also see this division. Maybe there is less among the groups that live more "traditionally": everybody with their own family and their territory. It's as though religion and politics have not really arrived there. What we need today are strong, serious politicians, who love their people and who look for ways to benefit the Shipibo People instead of benefitting themselves and their own family; leaders who really represent their people. The problem is also that for many people, having access to land means buying it and the majority of lands are now individually owned. I mean, you have to buy your land if you want to live off the land, you have to buy your land if you want to plant crops. Because our leaders have accepted agreements that have allowed the exploitation of our Indigenous territories. Nowadays the leaders only have technical training, they are agricultural engineers and

things like that. Maybe it would be good to have a Shipibo *ayahuasquero* politician. Maybe it would be different. Because when the current leaders talk about the issue of ayahuasca, they don't know what they are talking about. They have never done a *dieta*, they have never participated. They talk about history, theory, things they read on the internet and bits of information they have found there.

How do you understand the division within the Shipibo community? Does it have an origin?

The origin is religion. Religion destroyed unity and the respect that people had for the *meraya* within the community. And so, the infamous attacks began. A pastor would arrive, or a person involved in the world of the church, and they would launch their famous gossiping: "The *meraya* is the devil!... He is making me ill!". Because just imagine, when there was a *meraya* in a community, the community had their doctor, and all the sick people went there and came back healthy. The *meraya* were the ones who relieved, the ones who practiced, who warned when there was going to be a flood so that people could move their houses to higher land, the ones who warned when there was going to be a drought, when there were going to be strong winds. They were like the scientists of the community. They were the wise people. And when religion came, it didn't like that: the priests felt that the *meraya* was more than a god, and so they started to install churches in every community and to create this division. They worked on young people's minds, saying that the *curandero* was simply a *brujo*, a liar, who practiced satanism. Meanwhile the elders were dying, and the young people were becoming more and more caught within that situation. You have to also understand that the *onanya* and the *meraya* were fed and cared for by the community; they had no wealth, but they did have fish, plantains, water and amenities. They ate the best things, they had an abundance of food because the people themselves, by way of thanks, would bring them lunch or dinner every day. They

had no need to go looking for fish. They lived doing their *dieta*, in concentration. Because that was their strength, their stability: doing more *dietas*, knowing more things. That is how they concentrated, and they didn't worry about other things. When religion arrived, nobody brought them food anymore, and everything became more commercial. Fishermen arrived and swept up all the fish to sell. But in the past, not even mestizos arrived there, never mind gringos. They said that nobody went to these communities because they didn't accept them. They didn't meet them with arrows, but they did frighten them. There was never much aggression in the Shipibo world, but they were well-armed and well-protected. Or if they weren't, they would move on.

So that destruction, that division, was created in the same way that organisations and politicians still create today: the pastor, the person from outside, had to go in with a Shipibo person. So, first of all, a Shipibo person would go in with things: gifts, sweets, food, rice, (and eating rice at that time was like eating gold!) and so the gifts would arrive first with a Shipibo person. Then they would arrive together, the Shipibo and the pastor, with more gifts. And they kept doing that, and then they settled in. They convinced one group and then they would start convincing families. With this story about the end of the world, for example: "if you don't do good you will go to hell. Judgement is coming. Your soul is going to burn, you're not going to be with God. Don't you want to save your soul for all eternity?" And of course, as the *onanya* used to say, confronting that was a really big *prueba* for us. And it continues to be a *prueba*. It is the *prueba* in which everything could disappear: our way of life, what we are, where we live, our knowledge. It is not violent, it is not aggressive, but it is something even stronger, when your own family ignores you or when your own people ignore what you are. I mean, when your own people ignore where they come from, how they have grown, and by what means. They don't remember that they were born underneath a plantain tree, underneath a staircase, others in a canoe, others at the edge of the

river. They want to be born in hospitals now. That is the saddest thing. They don't realise where they come from. And that is how they got in: religion, colonisation, politics and so many other things.

But how did people let themselves be carried away by what priests said more than what their onanya*, or their* meraya *or their* yobe *said?*

My grandfather said that before religion arrived, the Indigenous world believed quite a lot in god, nun *ibo*, in Shipibo, "our creator". But there were no churches, or crosses, or a bible. And if they acted in a negative way, they would go into the forest and fast, and they would talk about what they had done and ask for, let's say, "forgiveness". They had that belief. But they did not believe in a church, that cult, with idols created by a human. They only focused on god. Because they believed that water, land, the forest, food, comes from the beyond. God as well. They would say: "we have land, food, the forest, the air, because everything comes from the beyond. *Nun ibo* is the beyond which has created this". In those days there were not even communities as we understand them today. Politics came to create community. Before that, everybody lived in their own territory. Wherever there was more fish, that is where they would settle. But if that fish was running out, they set off to look for another place. And that is how people lived. Their territory was not fixed. They were large, entire families. And one family lived over here, and another one lived over there. And that is how they lived, moving from place to place. They were hard workers, and they could build a house quickly. Politics and religion came to make community, to settle them in a territory. And now the communities are Adventists and Evangelists. Because nobody believes in the priests any more. But the Adventists and Evangelists are the ones that are most against us. The Catholics criticise us less. Nowadays, in the communities, the majority value those who are against us. My sister was an Adventist, and she didn't want us to come near her anymore. When we went to her house, we would

always tease her, "I am your real brother", I would say to her, "you believe in god but instead of giving me love, instead of hugging me, instead of receiving me in a kind way so I can learn from you about how you live, you are full of rage. You'd better go and take some ayahuasca!'" Now she takes ayahuasca.

Together with religion, does commercialisation also play an important role in the attacks?

Exactly, nowadays, the attacks in the Indigenous world are not spiritual but economic. Ayahuasca is now becoming a super-business. Before, you learned because you felt like learning; because you saw your mum, your grandfather, and you said "wow, I would like that, I want to be like that too". But today what I have seen is that, if an Indigenous person comes along, or someone who has no money, a lot of *curanderos* won't meet with them, they say: "ah, I don't have time, I am busy". But if someone says to them ''hey! There's a retreat, there are 20 gringos", then you don't see them for dust. And so, the essential is being lost. Because the apprenticeship is now based on thinking, it is not connected to the heart. It is like politics. Like when politicians go to a community, give a gallon of alcohol to the elders who like to get drunk. Then sweets to the kids. They sweeten them all up. And it's all words, just words. But their actions … maybe they sometimes think "I am going to do this for my people" but when they get into power it is different. The same thing happens in *curandero* practice with the will to learn, the will to do *dieta*. "When I have money, I will help this person and that person, I will help my family". But when they have money, they think they are more powerful, they think they are more than you. So, the medicine also becomes more of the same. That is the easy path.

Politically, in the Indigenous world, I see a lot of manipulation. There is a lot of knowledge to be discovered, to be developed and to be shared. But today, Indigenous people are mean,

or even selfish, with the medicine. Among ourselves and towards others. Towards foreigners, when we say: "why should we teach them? Why should we share everything we know?" Obviously, we have to be careful about what we share, but there has to be a limit to the unwillingness to share. I bet you this: if you go to a Shipibo community and say: "I am working with José", just with that name "José López", they will say a thousand bad things about me. That I don't know, or that I am a liar, etc. There is always that kind of rivalry among us. And that is where the attacks, the separation, the fragmentation begin. When you are preparing to walk along this path, you have to forget about all that. But when you are not prepared for this path, you start by carrying out bad actions. It is really difficult to heal that in our community. Although it would be magnificent to do that. Imagine how we could help each other as a united people. Gather our strength together. Everything would be different.

Do you see this division as a strategy of colonial power, aimed precisely at separating Indigenous peoples?

Exactly that. That is what they have done everywhere. Politics, religion, colonisation and now trade. Nowadays the Indigenous world is not like it was before. We are forgetting, we are leaving behind our customs, our myths, our beliefs, our way of life. I even sometimes say "what am I doing? I have the power and the strength and suddenly my son gets a bit sick (like he has a sore throat or a fever) and I go looking for antibiotics and pills! Even though I have all my medicine to hand". But sometimes impatience is really strong. It was different before. Obviously, there was fever, but you knew that your son would get through it. And that nothing would happen. And that kind of medicine is not about going to buy it, taking it and that's it. It is not like going to the chemist's and saying: "sell me something!". This medicine works in a different way. It is slow, but it heals you well.

"Why are you wearing a *kushma*? it is hot! you wear your knowledge inside"

It is difficult for foreigners to think about modernity and get close to today's onanya *without idealising the past, or without looking for their own often exotic idea, of how it was in the past and how today's* onanya *should act to be "authentic". Preserving what shouldn't be lost in this collaborative work with plants is also very important for you, in everything you defend and what you are wanting to put in this book. But your way of wanting to bring the past up to date might be very different, at times, to how foreign men and women understand "the preservation of a tradition". Could we say that the healing process you are describing entails correcting the image that the "gringo" has of the "Indigenous" ? Or perhaps also that to access and understand your medicine we need to correct the idealised image that the gringo mentality projects onto "Indigenous* maestros *and* maestras"*?*

Six or seven years ago, a gringo who was doing *dieta* asked me: "Do you go into the city? Do you drink coca-cola?" "More often than you" I answered him. That is the idea that they have: they think that the *maestro* is pure. I think this also comes from religion. The mentality of being chosen by god. That there are chosen people and people that are not chosen. That difference. That division. My uncle used to say, before he died: "why are you wearing a *kushma*? It is hot! Inside is where you wear your knowledge". That is very clear. The *onanya* and the *meraya* were everyday people. On this path, the idea of "I am more, he is less" doesn't exist.

"The gringo also comes with the idea that true *curanderos* don´t charge money"

Nowadays the gringo also comes with the idea that true *curanderos* don't charge money. I have even seen a news report about a gringo (who they call "the gringo shaman of Iquitos" and who prepares and sells a lot of ayahuasca) in which he states that true *curanderos* don't charge. In the past it was like that, the mestizo Peruvians would come with their rice, their sugar, with a shirt, with some slippers for the *curandero's* son and they gave it in exchange. And a Shipibo person from the same community, or from another community, would bring his own *ayahuasca* and his own *chacruna*[117]. The *curandero* would say "prepare yourself, I'll show you", and they would take the ayahuasca.

Today you have to buy everything. Because you go to your *chacra* or into the forest and there is no more ayahuasca. You have to buy it from someone to be able to work. As my grandfather used to say to me: "Do you think that if you go looking for healing in a hospital, they will cure you for free? That they will give it to you for free because you come from somewhere else and they know a lot about their medicine? They will not give it to you for free! They will charge you! So, charge them! Those who don't have money, don't charge them, give them some work or do an exchange. So that in one way or another, they pay you. But those who have money, charge them all!".

"Because they have a nice house, a lodge, a stable economy, they are turning gringo"

It is challenging to work deeply with this medicine, it is challenging to work in a community, in a lodge, or to only work outside of the community in western countries. It is difficult to manage all those *bultos* that we have talked about; to maintain both

[117] This refers to two plants (*Banisteriopsis Caapi* and *Chacruna Viridis*), the basic ingredients for the preparation of the ayahuasca decoction, which is called *Oni* in the Shipibo language.

sides, the medicine and the patients' demands, and to take on the consequences of each side. And today I still want to keep understanding how to maintain and manage both sides at once. Because when you only focus on the modernised side, the cultural side suffers. I see how the egos of many *curanderos* get bigger when they work in lodges, and they enter a world in which it is common to think "I am better than you". Because they have a nice house, a lodge, a stable economy, they are turning gringo. They leave behind their customs; they leave behind their people. "I no longer talk to my neighbours or my people, I only speak to scientists". They take these ideas to their people and it changes the way they behave among their people.

"This medicine, with *dietas*, wasn´t for women. I don´t know if that was about machismo or to protect them. But it wasn´t for women"

And what was the apprenticeship like for women? Was it different?

In the past, in the Indigenous world, they did not teach women because of menstruation. But they were wrong. That was sexist. They didn't want women to learn these things. They only let them work on births, be midwives, and heal with plants, but without the *dietas*. I don't believe that women can't learn this because of menstruation. Women have evolved in the same way as men, and they can learn the same things. Maybe they have qualities that are a bit different, for example, knowing how to withstand pregnancy. And perhaps they have the courage and the strength to understand human beings, to understand the traumas that people carry. They are stronger than men and they work harder. Women become *onanya* more easily. In the past there were no women *onanya*, or *meraya*, because they weren't given the opportunity.

Maybe because if they could have chosen this from when they were small, they wouldn't have wanted to have a husband and children. Instead, it was their parents who decided who they were going to marry from an early age. It was decided early, even though they would get married later. Then it started to change, some 50 years ago.

My mother started late, after having 3 children. Three women started to do *dieta* at that time: my mum and two more women. They all started because they were ill: because of a need to heal themselves. My mother wanted to learn about medicine, but learning when you already have kids is terrible. When she started with the medicine, the *pruebas* started: firstly, she lost a son, then she separated from my dad, and then she was ill for a long time. And so, she had to abandon us. It was my sister who brought us up, because when you are doing *dieta* you can't come out of it. Even if you can see that your children need support, you can't come out of it. That is really hard. Because you end up losing faith in yourself and in everyone else. My mother came out of her first *dieta* because she wanted to help her son who was 11 years old and was sick. But because she left and crossed her *dieta*, her son died. Then she got ill. She went from *curandero* to *curandero*. And she suffered great sadness because she was doing *dieta* with a tree. And they said to her that the tree itself had put a *shitana*[118] on her. And that is really difficult to heal. And who healed her? My uncle. That is perhaps why they didn't want women to get involved in this, because a mother gives her life for her child. And that is why it is good to learn as a child when *pruebas* like that can't come. I see that my sister keeps having really hard *pruebas* with her children and grandchildren. But she continues and keeps going. I mean, maybe these are the reasons why they didn't allow women to do a *dieta*, but it probably also had to do with jealousy and machismo. There is

[118] Similarly to the crossing of a *dieta*, saying that the tree has put a *shitana* on someone refers to the possibility that the plant a person is doing a *dieta* with, could turn against them.

a lot of risk for your kids and loved ones when you do *dieta*, whether you are a man or a woman.

When you are with strong plants, you can't even touch your children, because it can clash with them, and you can cross your *dieta*. It is really hard.

Do you think that the machismo you talk about already existed in the communities before the arrival of colonisation?

I think that it already existed but not as strongly. Before colonialism, each person had their space and the communities moved around, they were not sedentary, and women and men each worked in their own space. For example, men built the houses (so they went into the forest to look for tree trunks) and women grew crops, harvested crops and cooked, but sometimes the men also took the women fishing and hunting so that they could learn, just in case their husband died. And when a man died, the woman was left in charge of the family. A lot of people wanted sons so they could help their father to hunt, because the daughters stayed in the house with their mum. In the past, the man had to go and live in his wife's home. Now, the men stay where they are, and the women move in. And everybody used to help each other. If, unfortunately, a family had only female children, then that family had to hand over their daughter to another family. A married man would be assessed by his father-in-law and he had to demonstrate that he was a good man. But a woman also had to visit her in-laws to show that she was a good woman and that she knew how to do things. And back then, this medicine, with *dietas*, wasn't for women. I don't know if that was about machismo or to protect them. But it wasn't for women.

So, women's apprenticeship within the medicine is something recent. Do you think that is related to international interest in the medicine?

Yes, the medicine had a bad reputation because of inappropriate sexual behaviour by male *curanderos*, and so there was a call for women to practice traditional medicine. In the first instance, a very well-known Shipibo *curandero* created an association and there were three groups in this association: the *onanya*, who were dedicated to the ceremonies; the *vegetalistas*, who were dedicated to looking for the plants, and the women, who prepared the remedies. And then they started looking within communities, in different parts of the Amazon region, for "wise women" who knew about traditional medicine. And as they had money, lots of women started learning from other *curanderos* who gave to them from their breath so that they could chant . But without much *dieta*, so when they confronted strong energies, they couldn't withstand them.

However, there are not many *curanderos* anymore who know how to manage those strong energies. Many *curanderos*, both men and women, chant, but they haven't learnt from the root. This is the effect of gringo interest for everyone, men and women. There are many chants that are rootless, learned by copying, maybe with some small *dietas* to deepen a little. The problem is that, entering a tougher level, a deeper more spiritual one, requires a lot, both for men and women. That is why they taught us from childhood, and why they didn't choose girls. If a *curandero* wanted his daughter to learn, then he would have to take care of her with his *ícaro* so that a husband wouldn't appear. But that never happened. It just wasn't done.

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[119] Here José differentiates between distinct ways of learning that imply different learning relationships between the *onanya* that gives the *dieta* and the apprentice. José makes a difference between learning directly from one's relationship with the plant or tree one is doing *dieta* with and learning from the *dieta* of the *maestro* or *maestra*. That is to say, an *onanya* can choose to give strength and knowledge to an apprentice "from their own *dieta*". In the first case, José uses images like "learning from the root" or "learning directly from the plants". In the second case he talks about people who learn because the *maestro* or *maestra* "puts (strength and knowledge) upon them from their *dieta*" or "gives (strength and knowledge) to them from their breath". In this case, the apprentice's strength and knowledge is highly dependent on the *maestro*. The *maestro* can take away this strength and knowledge at any time.

In terms of how learning is taking place now (for adults, men and women), women learn much quicker, and they are more sensitive and disciplined. Young women get aligned more quickly. It's as though the medicine itself has a different way of working with women.

Chapter 7

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Introduction
"Healing the gringo: teaching how to learn from the difficult path"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

In this chapter José addresses a number of misunderstandings that lie at the very heart of the encounter between his know-how and his foreign patients.

The first misunderstanding concerns the "gringo" difficulty of understanding the *onanya's* work and also the patient's role within the ceremonies and *dietas*. It is part of the "gringo" mentality, José indicates, to think that "doing *dieta*" means "working on oneself" in the sense of being an active agent of one's own healing. I understand this attitude as being determined by his patients' familiarity with psychotherapeutic frameworks which call for "introspective work". In José's method of practicing Shipibo medicine, the period of doing *dietas* and the ayahuasca ceremonies are moments in which the *onanya* and the plants put themselves to work for the patient's healing. The role of the patient is to respect the restrictions of the *dietas* which are, José explains, the only way of demonstrating (and learning to give) respect to the plants. The tendency to understand the period of doing *dieta* and the ceremonial space as exceptional moments, in which each person "works on themselves", is perceived by José as "a very mental process" and as a lack of respect towards his work and the work of the plants. He describes this lack of respect as a "resistance" to the treatment, or rather a way of impeding the work of the experts, whether they be humans or plants. Clarifying this with an image,

José tells us that if the *onanya* are the surgeons, it is as though the patients want to be the ones opening up their own bellies.

We have undertaken many conversational exchanges to delve deeper into this misunderstanding and to perhaps begin to clarify it. José goes into more detail here about what it means, from the point of view of an *onanya*, to diagnose and "bring forth a treatment" that is lighter, that is to say, "with as few *pruebas* as possible". We previously talked about diagnosis as the capacity to see and touch the deep causes of illnesses and of *"mal vivir"* or suffering. Here, diagnosis is complemented by the ability to "mediate" between the plants and the patients during the treatment. As we have mentioned previously, the way in which the plants "communicate", "work" and "demonstrate their curative integrity" is concomitant, or even synonymous, with the "*pruebas* that they give". José explains that the plants "connect each person with their trauma", or rather, awaken and indicate, through the pruebas, that which needs healing. The *onanya* therefore appears in this process as a mediator. Their work takes the form of a risk management. In one image, awakening a trauma too directly can be like "activating a nest of angry wasps" which can then violently attack both the patient and the *curandero*. What to touch, how to touch it and "how to sustain it from there" are the action-images that José shares with us in relation to this management.

If risk management is the space for the *onanya's* competence, the space in which the patient's work becomes more central is during the post-*dieta*. This is when potential transformations take place as the patients return to "their world", to their daily life, to their routines, to their country. The patient's work is framed as a "responsibility" that cannot be understood without entering into its relational aspect. Responsibility implies understanding the restrictions as a conversation which you are having with the plants, an action that the plants know how to recognise and to which they react. Here, the *pharmakon* of this traditional medicine appears once again: doing *dieta* implies committing to a relational process with the plants you are doing *dieta* with. When this commitment is not respected, it turns against

both patient and *onanya*, who is the mediator and the guarantor of good relations between the patients and the plants. In this role of "mediator of the *pharmakon*", the *onanya* has the ability and the responsibility of modulating the intensity of the patient's experience so that the treatment is adjusted to fit with what they can withstand, traverse, and "sustain". We also return here to a language of shared bodies and of bodies going through *pruebas* together. This shared space is where "clients" are transformed into "patients" and where respect for relationships, and relationships with the plants, becomes imperative.

José uses images to speak about how respect used to be practiced and experienced; respect for the places, the plants, and their mothers or masters. He speaks of simple gestures, but with profound consequences, gestures which they were taught as children. This leads us once again to a criticism of the extractivist and commercial mentality which transforms the forest into resources and its inhabitants into extractors, into dissatisfied and ambitious consumers, for whom it becomes normal to obtain profits constantly, easily and rapidly. The ambitious and arrogant thirst for power - which José describes as a "gringo trauma"- appears here as preventing many people from approaching traditional practices and from undertaking the long and difficult processes that this medicine proposes. The difficulty inherent in these healing paths is part of other misunderstandings that José wishes to clarify.

José remembers the moment when he started working with "tourists" and how that enabled him to start perceiving differences between the Indigenous world and the non-Indigenous world. José associates modern life with, among other things, wanting and obtaining everything quickly and easily. In this respect, his medicine confronts and contrasts with this type of attitude. This is where it becomes necessary to talk about the "difficult path" inherent in Shipibo medicine and to discuss the fact that its healing processes imply making a choice to take that difficult path and its *pruebas*. This difficult path therefore appears as a process which does not resolve problems quickly, which may

even heighten pain instead of easing it, but which in the end, can manage to heal the "root" of what makes a person ill. The depth of this healing possibility aims directly for the causes of illness and therefore puts less focus on symptoms and their temporary relief. The objective of the treatment which this medicine proposes, is not to respond by relieving the symptoms as quickly as possible, nor to experience ecstatic sensations or visions, but rather to touch, open, transform that which is necessary, so that achieving another kind of relief, at a different depth, becomes possible. Perhaps this transformation requires the manifestation of new symptoms, difficulties in life (or *pruebas*). However, this is the way that this traditional medicine operates to reach a type of healing aimed directly at the aetiology (the cause of illness), by constantly expanding it, deepening it and imagining it.

"Every night, every ayahuasquero feels fear", José tells us. The confrontation with what requires healing, continues to be terrifying for the *onanya* within the sharing of bodies, chants and visions. The *onanya* are defined here through the very responsibility they accept by undertaking this aetiological investigation. An investigation that can lead to a deep healing. In the management of these interrelated spaces, at times shared, at times differentiated, the *onanya's* responsibility is at stake. *"If the curandero commits an error, everyone falls"* like a house which is being built little by little and then suddenly falls down entirely. José often returns to this image of the therapeutic process being like the progressive building of a house or of a *maloca* (Indigenous community building). Errors and *dieta* crosses attack the construction and when they are serious, they can knock down all the work done thus far and demand new *dietas* to clean up what has been destroyed and to start building afresh.

By means of what José describes as "typically gringo traumas", we explore the possibilities of "transcultural" diagnosis and aetiology, accompanied by a decolonial critique. In the conversations in this chapter, José shares his own research into his patient group and the way in which this enables him to reflect and look at what is happening at the local level among his people. He

addresses individual and collective healing responsibility by juxtaposing images of *malocas* which are collectively founded, built and destroyed.

"They think they are self-*curanderos*, they don't see themselves, humbly, as patients"

You were saying that during a ceremony or while doing dieta*, foreigners think that they themselves are doing the work, and that this attitude in fact shows a lack of respect for the work of the* curandero *and of the plants. We come from a world in which the possibility of improving yourself through therapy requires your personal involvement in the work. Because if a patient asks for help from a psychologist, they will be asked to "work on themself". So, this idea of "working on oneself" stems from good intention, although it belongs to another kind of learning and work.*

The patient has their part in the work, but it is not how you describe it. The patient has to learn respect, patience; has to maintain their *dieta* and their post-*dieta* when the *pruebas* come. The patient has to learn to stay still, to stand firm in their intention to heal. However, what I have talked about and what you are describing is personal mental work. It is something very gringo.

It is something very different for the plants and the *maestro* to work for you. And it is very gringo to think that you yourself are working on yourself. If I, or the plants, are surgeons, just imagine, it would be like the patients wanting to open up their own bellies; I mean, doing the surgeon's work… better for them to pick up a machete themselves and take out everything they have. That is the gringo mentality in this working environment. They do not respect the work of the plants or the work of the *curandero*, they think that

they themselves are doing the work. They think they are self-*curanderos*. And they say that as they now have a good level of *dieta*, that they are going to do the work themselves. They don't see themselves, humbly, as patients, they don't come in search of help. So, if they want to do it on their own, they'd better get themselves to the *maloca*[120], take the medicine and chant themselves. Or in other words, they'd better buy ayahuascaine, take it and have done with it.

It is important to understand that the patient's work starts after leaving here; that part is their responsibility. They are no longer in *Shipibo Rao*, there is no longer a *maestro* every day blowing *soplo* on their head[121]. That is where their work lies: how to maintain it, how to keep it going. They can run around, shout, cry, whatever, but they can't get angry, they can't cross the *dieta*. And that part of the work mustn't be done for us, the *maestros*, even though we suffer if they cross the *dieta*. That work has to be done for the plants[122]. And this question is the most difficult for the gringo to understand.

The only work (and I would like you to write this in really big letters in the book) that should be done by a person who comes looking for this kind of help, is to have patience and trust, to not be in resistance. This doesn't mean that the patient should come submissively to serve us, but it does mean that they come with respect, patience and trust. Because the gringo studies a lot, reads a lot, knows and researches thousands of things. However, that is why they come here with a very mental mindset and they think that when they come and take ayahuasca, they are going to

[120] Ceremonial place.

[121] José is referring here to the *maestro's* gesture of blowing on the upper part of the patient's head. The *soplo* is very often accompanied by tobacco smoke or by the oral spraying of "flower water". The gesture of blowing *soplo* implies offering significant help to the patient, often explained as a purification or a relief.

[122] José refers here to this shared way of feeling a *dieta* cross. The *onanya* who gives the *dieta* is a mediator between the plant of the *dieta* and the person doing the *dieta*. It is therefore the *onanya* who feels the cross first in their body. However, the reactions that the plants can continue to have against a patient who crosses a *dieta*, are the riskiest.

do the work. Here they simply have to concentrate. Because the *curandero* is the one who looks at "what can I give you, what quantity, how can I do this?". That is why ayahuasca is there: so that we can diagnose, so that we can look at how their treatment can emerge in a good way and without too many *pruebas*.

However, sometimes the gringo comes and says that they want more ayahuasca because they have not had a *mareo*[123]; there are even some who come to do *dieta* for a month, they stay in *mareo* for 3 days after a ceremony and they think it is not enough. They want more *mareo*. But we cannot do that. If I give them a full glass, with all the load that they carry, they could get lost[124]. And if they don't get lost, they could go crazy. Like many people I have cared for here who have come from retreats in other lodges where everything works like a program. First ceremony, a little [ayahuasca], second ceremony more, third ceremony more again. And at times, in the ceremony, they explode. And when as a *curandero* you move an energy that has been dead for years, you activate a nest of wasps which is very well hidden, and they are pretty angry. And if I am not prepared, as a *curandero*, to control that nest of wasps, it can get out of control; and that energy can go against me and against the patient, and how do you think that the process is going to continue for this person with all the wasps out? That is why for this kind of work, we have to be careful about the type and position of the energy that we are going to touch, and how we are going to hold onto it.

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[123] Translators' note: This refers, as a verb, as a noun or as an adjective, to the effect resulting from the ingestion of ayahuasca or some other plants. We could have translated it as "altered state", "dizziness", "drunkenness", "sickness" or "vertigo". None of these translations would have carried the way in which the *mareación/mareo* functions a space of medical research and healing action for the *onanya*. We have therefore kept the Spanish.

[124] "They could get lost" refers to the possibility that the patient could get out of control or stay blocked within their own suffering, their illness, and could in fact be left much worse off after a ceremony.

"Ayahuasca is not easy"

You talk about teaching the gringo respect for the plants and for the knowledge that emerges from the dietas*, as part of what they need for their own healing. And it is part of that process to understand that it is not an easy pathway. The easy path would be perhaps to use ayahuascaine, but it does not heal.*

Ayahuasca is not easy. It is not as it looks on the internet: "We take it, and we will see our centre, our "internal self", who I am and who I am not; I am going to see my future, visit the world of the spiritual realms…" Or as in Pablo Amaringo's drawing:[125] "the *curanderos* are on one side and on the other are women, men, rainbows, mermaids and dolphins".

In reality, every night, every *ayahuasquero* feels fear. There is not even one *ayahuasquero* (no matter how strong they are or how much *dieta* they have done) who is not afraid. Fear is always there, it is part of a human being, because many people asking for healing are under the *curandero's* responsibility. You don't know how they are going to react. Fear often comes to us in our daily lives. That is why I tell my wife: "don't say anything to me on the day of my ceremony; if I have committed an error or if you hear something bad about me, at that moment, don't tell me. When my ceremony has ended, complain to me about whatever you like" because if you arrive at the ceremony with this argument, with this energy, you darken the ceremony for the whole group that you have under your responsibility; the *dietas* break, someone gets ill, another person's process, that was going well, suddenly gets worse … even the potency of the *ícaro* lessens. So, the *maestro* doesn't know what to do because his conscience is loaded, the error is within him. And instead of the group finding healing, things deteriorate and it all becomes crossed[126].

[125] Pablo Amaringo is very well know Shipibo *ayahuasquero* and artist.

[126] We return here to the idea of the "crossing" but in another way. Here it describes the way in which an *onanya's* error can become a ceremonial frame that "crosses" the patients' healing processes.

For this reason, a *maestro* must have personal integrity in his work. If a *maestro* is leading a *dieta* for a group, he cannot commit errors. If he commits an error, something that goes against his integrity, it can tip over onto the whole group; it would be as if he had started building a really beautiful *maloca* for everybody; the first day goes really well, the second day too, but then the *maestro* commits an error and the whole *maloca* falls down on top of them all. In the work done today with ayahuasca many such errors are being committed, because of money. Money corrupts to a great extent the practice and work because there are more possibilities to consume and commit errors.

"All this can be about learning, for us and for the gringo"

Money is a prueba *as much for the* onanya *as for foreigners, a local and international* prueba*; even global, we could say. When Indigenous medicine adapts to the market and its clients, does it continue to be Indigenous?*

All this can be about learning, for us and for the gringo. Because we could improve, change and see things in a different way. Of course, we live in the Indigenous world; I think that the word "Indigenous" sounds good and there are few opportunities to learn about Indigenous knowledge because often Indigenous people are devalued. In our communities, it could be said that there are two opportunities: one is to develop oneself as a *curandero* or as an *ayahuasquero*, or a *vegetalista*, or whatever you want to call it, and the other is to better yourself through technical studies, looking for diplomas and work opportunities. What is the mistake made by Indigenous people nowadays? It is exactly the same story, or the same error, that is happening with traditional medicine: the separation from humility. This is the professional *prueba* that is happening right now: when a *curandero* is well-recognised, he has

learned something, or he has obtained something, he might believe he is superior to everyone else. That is when our ego grows. We should resist this more.

"Sometimes also, instead of easing your pain, this medicine heightens the symptoms"

Sometimes also, this medicine, with its *pruebas*, instead of easing your pain, heightens the symptoms. My great-uncle used to say: "that is because it is removing what it needs to remove". Instead, pills always ease pain, but they leave your body weaker. For example, I grew up drinking river water. Now I think: "I don't want to drink river water; I have to drink purified water. If the water isn't purified, I'm not drinking it". In other words, "what has happened in my mind?" To tell you the truth, I have thought many times, "what would people say if I drank this water which is not purified?", as if I was ashamed of showing where I come from, what I really am. When I started working in the gringo world, I was like that.

"They have convinced us that living how we lived before is bad, that it is dangerous"

In the past it was different, we had a very open life. And I have realised that I have weakened my body with these modern ways of life. Mentally I am entering a world of fear. The same is also happening to many other people: they have convinced us that living as we lived in the past is bad, that it is dangerous. It is true that today the rivers are more polluted and before they were not,

maybe that is why the fear of drinking river water exists, but the native communities have been separating from their customs, from their way of doing and living. In the past, when we were kids, they gave us Shipibo names, or they gave us the job of looking after a plant. Now this does not exist. For a Shipibo kid born now, it means nothing to cut down a *piñón*[127] or an ayahuasca. In the past, this respect existed. You could not even pee less than one metre away from some plants. "That plant will punish you if you pee or if you make fun of it" or "don't go and pee in that part of the river pool because that is where the plant's mother is" or "don't shout in that area because that's where the mother is". Each plant, each place had its master or its mother. You had to respect. If you accidentally went for a pee on a particular plant, without realising, the next day you had to ask for forgiveness or make an offering by fasting. But today all that has been totally lost. Nowadays everyone pees wherever they like, cuts down plants, cultivates areas of land, to plant potatoes, yucca, rice and sell it in Pucallpa. There has always been agriculture, but in those times, they farmed land where the grasses weren't growing well. Nowadays they cut trees down as if it meant nothing. Respect is being lost. And there is no organisation, or association that protects those things, that can come to help us reactivate what has been lost. They simply talk about politics: that development is necessary, that roads have to be built. And often the Indigenous politicians also conform to this rhetoric.

"That is when I started to understand the gringo way of thinking: I want an ayahuasca ceremony in Ausangate!"[128]

I think that we have arrived here at the heart of what "healing the gringo" within each of us implies. Listening to you talk about how to "heal the gringo", we realise that what you call "gringo" can have a white face or an Amazonian

[127] The *piñón blanco* and the *piñón colorado* (Jatropha *Curcas* and Jatropha *gossypiifolia*, *Euphorbiaceae*).
[128] Mountain in the Cuzco region (6384 m), very well known in tourist itineraries.

face, can come from outside or can lie at the very heart of Indigenous communities themselves. When you talk about the "gringo" you are talking about transformations in ways of relating and in the values that motivate people. You go beyond the origin of individuals, proposing instead the healing of modern attitudes and designs that transform ways of behaving, of feeling, and of situating ourselves in the world. Perhaps we could talk about how you have learned to work with foreigners, by going back to how it began. How did your research into "the gringo" start, or how do people "turn gringo"?

I remember going to work in Cuzco. I had not worked as an *ayahuasquero,* I was studying tourism. I also worked in an agency, washing dishes. I was still very young for anyone to believe I was an *ayahuasquero*. And then, when I was around 18 years old, some friends of mine from Iquitos who worked in a tourist agency and were studying with me, said:

"*Charapa*!", (that is what they called me).
"What?", I said to them,
"Our *ayahuasquero* has gone! He didn't turn up! Now who will do the ceremony?" And unfortunately for me, I said,
"I will".
"Do you know how to do it?"
"Yes", I said. "Where are you going to do the ceremony?"
"In Ausangate". I had never walked so far up in the mountains, so high up in the snow-caps. And I didn't know what Ausangate was either, I had seen photos, nothing more. "Ok then", I said. And that is when I started to understand the gringo way of thinking:
"I want an ayahuasca ceremony in Ausangate!".
"And how much does it pay?"
"70 dollars per gringo".
"And how many are there?"
"There are 15 of them".
"Right, let's go!".

It was a lot of money. But how I regretted saying I would walk all the way up there! We arrived at 3 in the afternoon, starving hungry. They had not brought anything to eat, just water. I wanted to eat. My lungs were about to explode. And at 6pm, it is freezing cold up there. They had brought some ayahuasca with them, but it wasn't any good. I mixed it with some that I had with me. Then it was better.

We took the ayahuasca. Everyone had a good *mareo* and the ceremony was really lovely, but while I was chanting it was so cold that the chant came out with an echo, with a tremble. We were inside a simple tent. All the gringos had come well-prepared. I don't know what type of jackets they were wearing; they must have been thermals. There were two porters who carried the water, and they were wearing ponchos. However, I was wearing my flimsy *chompita*[129] that cost 30 soles. Fortunately, the guide realised and gave me his jacket. So, I felt better then, and I did the ceremony.

The ceremony was just chanting and looking. That was lucky, because I was sitting down, and they didn't ask me to sing to them one by one. Because I couldn't even stand up due to the cold. And the next day they told me, "hey, you can earn more money here". And from there I started doing ceremonies and I became really well-known in Cuzco. And I stopped washing dishes.

"That is when my research into gringos began. At first, I was just doing ceremonies, with no healing. They didn´t ask for anything more"

From that time, I started doing ceremonies for gringos. When the agencies called me, they thought I was going to be an

[129] A sweatshirt.

older person. At that time, I was skinny, because I was coming out of my *dietas* and so I appeared to be even younger. They would look at me funny. "This snotty little kid?" They would tease me like that at every ceremony. And that was when I started studying the gringo. At first, I was just doing ceremonies, with no healing; they didn't ask for anything more. They were ceremonies for chanting, opening up visions, and that was it.

Back then I didn't know about the gringo madness. I thought the gringos were the happiest people in the world, because they had it all: travels, material things, money. I never even imagined that gringos were crazier than me. This came later, when I began to work a little more deeply. And that was an important stage in my development; I started to understand something new, to go deeper, learning little by little, until I reached a certain level of medicine work. But if they said to me now, "Let's go to do a ceremony in Ausangate", I would reply, "no, thanks". I would no longer venture into doing an ayahuasca ceremony organised by an agency.

Now, in your own centre, you give dietas *to foreigners.*

This work is really difficult because the majority of foreigners don't understand what doing *dieta* is. I am starting to get disappointed in doing *dietas* with them, because they are doing well, but then they cross the *dieta* and I have to withstand a lot and that affects me a lot. Because the effects of crossing the *dieta* do not go against them directly, instead they go against me, or rather against us, those of us that are doing the work. And that affects our health, sleep, problems arise, delays, etc. Strong *pruebas* come. And you have to know how to come out of there. But if I can't withstand it, if I let go of the patients, they will come for me. I know there will be complaints, and it gets messy. That is where the integrity of my work lies, in keeping my word. My responsibility. I have to withstand it. Unfortunately, I have to keep going. But I am also

tired of working like this: everyone leaves my centre, *Shipibo Rao*, really well, but outside of there, things happen. The restrictions are explained to them, but sometimes they let things get out of hand.

"Their work begins when they return to their reality"

The patients' work begins when they return to their reality, that is the real work, that is the true ceremony.

Because the *maestro* is no longer there to blow *soplo* on you or to say to you "tonight I will align you, don't worry"[130]. That is where the compliance is. The power of your word, of whether you comply or don't comply. Maintaining the post-*dieta* is really difficult work for them and they don't understand it.

What is more, if they go directly to the tree to harvest from it and to ask for something before starting the *dieta*, the consequences are even stronger if there are non-compliances during the post-*dieta*. This is because the work is no longer being done through the *ícaro*, but by you yourself asking the tree directly. We are not talking about going to buy the medicine in the *Mercado 2* market in Pucallpa, where the tree has already been cut, where you just take it like a simple medicine.

[130] Here José refers to the possibility of the *curandero* "rectifying" a *dieta* cross for the patient who has made the cross. For involuntary, accidental *dieta* crosses, this way of proceeding is possible.

"It is as if you are constructing a beautiful building and the person themself, the owner themself, knocks it down"

The patients are well while you can keep aligning them, but sometimes you can't align them in just one ceremony. It is as if you are constructing a beautiful building and the person themself, the owner themself, knocks it down … and to build it back up again, first you have to clear it all up, then design it again, build it again, the same thing all over again. So, you could say the work is tripled. And keeping going and maintaining it is heavy work. Something that nobody can understand until they put themselves in your place and do the work. Explaining with words is difficult. And it is difficult to understand. It has to be experienced to be understood.

"The most messed up trauma that can be seen in every gringo is the anxiety to obtain something quickly and easily"

You have been working now for twenty years with foreign patients and delving deeply with them into the kind of medicine and healing that they are looking for and that they need. Within your diagnoses, do you notice any type of illnesses or malaise that are common among foreigners?

Yes. In the gringo world there are different traumas. Some are deeper, held very deeply inside, others are easier. First of all, the most messed up trauma that can be seen in every gringo is the anxiety to obtain something quickly and easily. That is the first one. They come with a lovely attitude, "Hello dear *maestro*" and if

you say to them, "No, there is no ceremony" then they react, "I've come for nothing, they have only given me one meal, I have paid". It is as if their character changes all of a sudden. These are the people who have always had everything or have been brought up in that way. "You want a sweet, you can have a sweet. You want an egg every day, you can have an egg every day".

Sexual trauma at an early age

Secondly, (and this happens more to women) there are many cases of rape within the family and of sexual violence at an early age. The majority of women come with gynaecological illnesses. It is very well known that a girl or boy at a young age is highly sensitive all over their body and when this type of rape occurs, illness always follows, insecurity, and instability with men. If a man says something to them, they react in a violent way. And that is why it is better for this type of patients to be cured by a female *curandera*, because in the ayahuasca if you touch them, or you want to blow *soplo* on them, they are fearful, judging. If you smile at her, she thinks, "Oh no! This one wants to be with me". So, they come with a lot of fear and insecurity inside themselves. The patients that come with that kind of sexual trauma from an early age grow up with this fear and don't care for themselves well. Maybe outwardly they look well, they look after their body and their mind, they take care with the food they eat, their way of walking, their way of speaking, their way of thinking, but inside they look really shut down, dark. There are two things that accompany that kind of trauma: a reactive character and mistrust. Mistrust makes their character become uncontrolled.

A TRAUMA RELATED TO POWER AND AMBITION

The third trauma that can be seen in every gringo is the ego. I call this "ego trauma", because a person who is not traumatised, does not have any ego, because they are centred. They are humble. They have a way of being which says ''I am, full stop''. And ego trauma is also accompanied by something that many gringos have: a trauma related to power and ambition. If they want to do *dieta* for a year, they do it. Out of ambition. It is also part of that trauma of always wanting more. You have something and you want more. You are not content with that and if you have much more you no longer know what to do with yourself and you do bad things. By contrast, an Indigenous person does not have much ambition. They yearn for things, but not much. They live day to day. And an Indigenous person does not program their time, they aren't thinking about what they are going to do next month. If they earn money, they go straight away to get drunk, to buy an engine, to buy food. They eat well; they dance well. The next day they get up again and get to work. The *mestizos* and Indigenous traumas are easier to work with, they are stronger in spirit and in energy, but less complicated. Because if you say to these people or you show them what they need to heal, they align very quickly. By contrast, a gringo doesn't, because if you show a gringo something, they want to know more, they want to learn more. And if they know something, they want to be more than the *curandero*. I mean, they already feel like the *maestro*, as if the *maestro* was their pupil. They now want to teach you how to do things. Because this is their trauma, their ego, their ambition. Their arrogance.

"They have many visions of their own traumas, but they don´t admit that their visions come from their traumas"

However, there are a lot of traumas. I have been talking here about the most specific and expressive kinds, because underneath there are lots of other things and translating them into words is really complicated. For this reason, patients have a lot of visions of their own traumas, of their fears, of their egos, but they don't admit that their visions come from their traumas. For example, when they see a spirit approaching, they think that it is a plant spirit. And they say, "It has approached me, it is with me. It has chosen me. I am important". Or they have a vision that they are given a crown to wear, because they have read it in books and on the internet, but teaching doesn't happen in that way, it happens in another way. So, I think that often they read things and when they see in their own vision, things from their past, their own ancestral stuff, they think that the ayahuasca is giving them power. And the next day they wake up happy and say that they have been chosen.

"Many of them come with faith, with a lot of faith"

At the same time, I see that many come with faith. With a lot of faith. And that is why I talk to them about all this, so that they can start understanding better how the work functions; in other words, so that they understand that the teaching comes from the *pruebas* after the *dieta* and that the post-*dieta* is difficult to manage. But it is very difficult for the gringo to manage this, more difficult than for an Indigenous person whose normal daily life is here. When the gringo returns to their reality, when they go back to work, back to their partner and to everything that was planned and

they don't do what is expected of them, or they behave in a different way, that can be like a bomb exploding in their lives.

"But when there is quite a high level of trauma, that fear, that anger dominates you instead of you dominating it. And you go into a *mareo* with no way out"

Many people say, ''I live with my trauma, or I control my trauma". I have heard people say this many times. However, a person can control their trauma when they are well, when they are not feeling the blow: whether it be the loss of a child, separation from a husband or wife, or from someone they have loved very much. So, if you don't have this trauma or you control that trauma, then you live a normal life, but when you don't control those traumas, you react out of hatred, vengeance, envy, or by using alcohol, addiction, drugs, and you do things that can cause hurt. Instead, when traumas disappear, your life is peaceful. If your partner has to go away, you give them all the blessings in the world because you are letting them go in a harmonious way. In other words, even if you have been betrayed or you have suddenly lost your son, you stand there, without resentment. If the person in front of you reacts out of trauma, you no longer do. You are simply in your centre. But words can say a thousand things, and when people act, their actions are different. And all of the negative things are placed in these traumas.

All human beings have good and bad aspects; nobody can say "I don't have a personality". Of course, we all have a personality, but when there is quite a high level of trauma, then that trauma, that fear, that anger controls you instead of you controlling it. And you go into a *mareo* with no way out. And while you are acting

negatively, (avenging yourself, hating, making other people have the worst time) you are fooling yourself, thinking that you are doing things well, but in reality, that isn't the case.

"In order for you to understand yourself and know yourself, the plant connects you with your traumas and makes you suffer"

Normally, as far as the plants are concerned, many people think, "I am coming to heal myself, I will finish my *dieta* and I will be happy, because I will have healed myself". Nevertheless, this works differently here. Many people don't understand that the plants connect you with your traumas and make you suffer, so that you can understand yourself and know yourself. He makes you see who you really are, to see whether you have the strength to walk on, to keep going, whatever happens, whatever crosses your path. That is where you can see where you are going, and how to direct yourself there.

The plants show you who you really are. And it is difficult. And it means suffering. And that *prueba* comes. We manage to keep ourselves stable in our centre or we go into a world of darkness, of addiction, a world of easy things, like working in drug trafficking here in the rainforest. Because when you are ill, quick and easy things seem like a good solution, but it is only if you stay firm, that the path starts opening up.

It is like the *curandero's* path: your future generations can only learn the good path, if you yourself want to learn it. But many human beings only think of themselves, of their own wellbeing, without thinking of their children and grandchildren. Nowadays, we want to have the best material things in the world, but material

things could run out at any time, whereas the positive things that you do in your life, will always be seeds that you sowed. Forever. That tree will grow and grow, and will scatter seeds all over the place, and will enable others to grow as well, just like that, one by one. But the negative things that you do, will become a *bulto* and those *bultos* are in darkness, as if they were stuck. You might be able to leave your children or your grandchildren a big house, an aeroplane, but then your grandchildren fight among themselves for that house or that aeroplane. Something like that.

Trauma is a theme which is very present in the world of psychology and therapy. In psychology there are many different opinions, but one school of psychology, the transpersonal school, works with trauma in a way that perhaps gets close to what you are explaining. Transpersonal psychology works with human relationships and with the way in which relationships constitute the person. Within transpersonal therapies there is an idea of trauma in which the traumatised person is a fragmented person. What should normally be united, is in pieces. And there are some pieces which turn bad, which are kind of damaged. So, this theory understands trauma, and healing from trauma, as a process of reintegrating the integrity of the person. And these practitioners talk to the traumatised part, and they ask that part, "what are you doing? And what are you defending? What do you want?" So, instead of punishing, they welcome these parts. Because often psychology tries to cover up, to supress, but the more that traumatised energy is suppressed, the more it wants to come out. So, this transpersonal theory says that it has to be allowed to come out. That energy needs to be seen and recognised, in order to be set free.

That is true. Because if you cover it up it is as though you were hiding something that is not right. But if you show it, you see it, you look at it, you feel it, you live it as it really is, then you can work with it. I think this is a really important subject. It is as if I, as a father, hid from my son the negative things he does. He will always be for me a light, a love, but there are times that I have to tell him off, "You are this, this and this". It is as if I am uncovering him so that he is not carrying in his conscience, nor me in mine, so many negative things. Because darkness cannot become light.

Chapter 8

Redesigning words: connection, error and intention

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Introduction "Redesigning words: connection, error and intention"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

This chapter continues to explore some of the misunderstandings that inhabit the space between Shipibo practices and international patients. José remembers "how the elders used to talk", a way of speaking which he calls "old Shipibo". He underlines its difference to "modern Shipibo" which has been given "meanings" through Spanish. This simple affirmation enables us to traverse part of local history, namely the arrival of schools organised by powers external to the Shipibo People: firstly, the evangelical schools from the *Instituto Lingüístico del Verano* and later the national education system and its bilingual programs. Opening up in this way the memory of his grandfather's teachings, José enables us to sense how the Shipibo language, in its written form, trapped by constant translations into and out of Spanish, has undergone a process of profound transformation. This transformation is related not only to the Shipibo language itself, but also to the exercise of Shipibo sovereignty over their own language.

The loss of old Shipibo, or rather, the old way of speaking Shipibo, reveals the interrelated aspects of language and the transmission of knowledge. When words do not emerge from lived experience, then words and mental processes take power, warns José. The difference that he proposes here is profoundly pragmatic: all efforts to transmit or represent are understood as secondary, because the priority is experience. The more that words and analysis "align", in the sense that they find harmony with this prioritisation

of experience, the less risks there will be of living in something akin to an illusion, an alienation or a hallucination. Hallucination appears therefore as a uniquely mental product, or as emerging from a mind that does not function as an "ally" of experience. When the mind is not "aligned" to the heart and to experience, José tells us, then the "visions" that a person can have, when taking ayahuasca for example, only show and emerge from what needs to be healed. Visions are differentiated here from hallucinations. The possibility of an experiential whole in which the mental part has its role, is contrasted here with a diseased mental exercise, in which the "vision" is a product of the illness. Moreover, hallucination is for José a mental product sent by an illness which the person does not manage to accept as such. Defending the possibility of communicating and collaborating with the plants through visions, dreams and *pruebas*, is central to his medicine practice. However, taking each vision which arises in an ayahuasca ceremony as a direct and immediate communication with a plant can be a misunderstanding with serious consequences, as in this way the person avoids looking at and recognising their own discomfort and the healing that has been proposed. The expression "the ayahuasca has told me", which José often hears among his patients, serves as a key to expose the hallucination of an easy and direct communication. Once again, José insists that the path to communicating with plants, is not an easy, quick or direct path. It is in fact a difficult path, difficult to find. A slow but deep path.

José addresses other misunderstandings in this chapter, questioning the way in which words are understood and used. The words which are progressively looked at are: connection, error and intention. These three words enable us to delve with greater depth into the meaning of the "*pruebas*", what it means to recognise a *prueba*, experience a *prueba*, go through one, and what it means to be in collaborative work with the plants. The *pruebas* therefore appear as the language of the plants and that language is gradually unfolding in experiential processes which can only be understood "from within", by experiencing them.

With regards to connection, José asks us to leave behind the image of a connection that works like a plug, like something that is turned on once and for all. He replaces the idea of an "immediate and easy" connection, with a "slow, difficult and uncertain" process of connecting. This process is exemplified by the very way that *pruebas* work. Delving deeper into the dynamics of the *pruebas*, José talks about *pruebas* that confront scepticism. These kinds of *pruebas* appear to establish an initial relational base between plants and patients. This implies recognition that the plants react and can turn against a person who uses them badly. Among the forms that the *pruebas* can take, José differentiates patients' *pruebas* from those of apprentices or *curanderos*. The patients' *pruebas* show the resistances of the person to their own healing and therefore show, amplify, "enable sight" of what needs to be healed. José insists on a particular type of *prueba*, which is very common nowadays, and which the plants give when they are treated as drugs. These types of *pruebas* show the plants' requirement to be treated with respect, thereby creating a relational space between living beings.

However, good relationships with the plants can also be damaged. The loss of good relations, the abusive use of relationships established during the *dietas*, can have radical consequences for the *curanderos* and *curanderas*: ranging from the loss of their ability to heal, to their illness and death. Here we enter a highly delicate area and José shares with us that as the *curandero* advances along his path, the *pruebas* become more and more personal, more discrete and almost secretive. Within this "connection" which involves constant relational care, José considers it important to explore more deeply what "errors" are and what they imply. At the centre of his reflection lies the difference between seeing an error as a moment in which someone is judged and seeing an error as something to correct, something to heal, something to repair, something which calls for work to be done. José considers the notion of "sin", and the idea of feeling guilty of an error, as a very mental response to something which instead requires dedication, work and which has a solution. The plants do not punish because they judge, they punish because within the way they heal, a seed can be found to repair the error. Indeed, José proposes using the

terms cleaning and learning in place of sinning and judgement. Using visions and images, José talks about error as being like a "*padlocked dungeon*", like a "well with no way out" and he specifies that the work of a *curandero* is to find the way to free the person. He tells us that he has to "chant starting from the main point of the error" and he expresses gratitude that he is part of a healing tradition where techniques and knowledge continue to exist to clean up errors and learn from them. Through these "existential landscapes", José says that every person has the possibility of healing and of "returning to being in their freedom". At the same time, the error appears as a diagnostical object and as a space in which the experts, the patients, and the plants come together in deep collaborative processes. Within these spaces, the healing intention guides them all. However, the word "intention" can also lead to many misunderstandings. Imbuing the work with the plants with a healing intention is something that requires a long and deep apprenticeship on the part of the *onanya* and the risk of diverting that intention is part of the *pruebas* given to "those who know". At the same time, within this space, José considers the intentions of his patients and once again wishes to correct a misunderstanding. Approaching traditional medicine with an intention can be very useful when the intention works as a guide in difficult moments. However, José insists that carrying an intention in this work does not mean asking for and expecting to receive what you want. Healing is an open and emerging process which has to be discovered through living experience.

"Connection with the plants is not like plugging in"

At many times in these conversations, the work that we are doing takes the form of correcting or updating the way in which your practices and knowledge are understood by others. We are redesigning perceptions, expectations, processes

and words. Some particular words that you want to review, crystallise a number of misunderstandings with regards to your work.

It would be good to return to the old Shipibo language to clarify many things. I don't know how to do that, but it would be good to do it. Today, there is a lot of confusion because a lot of Spanish is spoken and a kind of Shipibo dictionary has been written, books have been written in Shipibo, and attempts have been made to give Shipibo language meanings from the Spanish language. I don't like talking about "*conexión*" (connection), or about "*conectar*" (to connect) for example, because many people understand that as being like connecting something to an electrical socket: "I am connected now", "I have done a *dieta* and now I'm connected". None of this is made of words, these are experiences. Knowledge comes only through your experiences, as do words, but in another way. Some words need to be clarified, like "intention", "energy", "trauma", perhaps "*arcana*" or "spirit and spirits". Those who say "this is spiritual" or "I am spiritual" say it with a religious understanding of what is spiritual. It would be lovely to take meanings from the past, because what the elders used to speak was really different to hear. I was curious about that at one point, and I used to spend time with them, and they spoke with other meanings.

"For us, connection means the *pruebas* that the plant puts you through"

Perhaps we can stay for a moment with this image of "connecting with the plants". You have said that the first objective of this medicine is not, as many foreigners say, to "connect with a plant" but rather to learn the respect necessary for the plants to connect us with our traumas, to show us where the work lies that needs to be done. And that connection to trauma is not achieved through visions, but rather through pruebas. *But how can these* pruebas *be understood?*

For us, connection means the *pruebas* that the plant puts you through. And the *pruebas* are what we call "connecting with the trauma". Many people think that connecting is a moment or a vision: "Wow, I saw the plant in my vision, now I am connected!". On the contrary, connection is something very strong and profound. The *pruebas*, for someone who is starting, are *pruebas* for finding healing. It is a lie if a gringo comes and says to you, "the ayahuasca told me that this is what I have to do", or "the ayahuasca has told me that I have to be a *curandero*". A gringa woman once told me, "I don't want any more ayahuasca: the ayahuasca has told me that I have to drink water from this bottle and that will be enough to heal me. I will never need to take ayahuasca again". These are things that are seen and heard in every ceremony. "Ayahuasca has told me" and that is not what the plants are. This is a mental process. It is their own story. They themselves create these things but they don't know where they come from. They themselves hallucinate and they believe their hallucinations because they have taken ayahuasca without reviewing their personal and ancestral traumas. In other words, it is their mind which is in charge. And in a ceremony, there are a thousand pieces of information, but to work with gringos you have to be very precise. I take great care when telling them things or when sharing what I see because their mind can easily go crazy. Mental power and language power are very significant for them. And it is difficult for them to stay in the experience, in the process of the *pruebas*.

"Crossing the *dieta*: the *dieta* and the apple"

Can you say anything more that would help to understand how pruebas *present themselves?*

This is very difficult to explain and really difficult for gringos to understand. When they start doing *dieta*, the *pruebas* come, and no matter how much ayahuasca or how many plants they take, they are still sceptical. We are all sceptical.

The first *prueba* is like having "your *dieta* and an apple" or "your *dieta* and a ceviche". You look at the two things, there is your *dieta* and there is the ceviche. You are physically well, mentally well and the *dieta* is there, the food is there, and at that moment, you say "Ah! I'll give it a taste and see what happens". Or maybe we are accustomed to thinking: "a little bit won't do me any harm". And we have the audacity to say, "I only ate a little bit, I didn't eat it all". However, these are serious decisions: my *dieta* or this. And a sceptical person says: "I don't believe it will do anything to me. I'll try it. The *maestro* won't see, he won't feel it". And you eat what you shouldn't. And you have no immediate reaction; you spend the week calmly. The consequences come afterwards.

That is crossing the *dieta*: when you don't respect what you have been asked to respect during your *dieta* and your post-*dieta*. For example, when you eat something outside of the food that you are given. You go to the kitchen, and you take a piece of pizza, and you eat it there, alone. Or they tell you not to have sexual relations, and then suddenly someone comes along, and you want to have sex, and you do it. Or you have been asked not to get angry, not to quarrel, not to get into a conflict, and you don't comply.

An accidental *dieta* cross is different and that can be cleaned more easily. A more serious cross is when you consciously do things that show a lack of respect for the work that the plants are doing with you.

Many gringos are affected by the power of their minds, by regret, "why did I do that?". And that destroys them. But there are also different reactions. It depends on each person's process,

according to whether your process is mental, or whether you come for the physical side of things, whether you come to experiment or to study.

If you take a plant like *marusa*[131], *chai*, *toe*[132], *piñón*[133], *ayahuma*[134], or *renaco caspi*[135], you only realise three months later. Your body turns white, there is no itching, nothing, but then spots start appearing on your face, on your back, your whole body. Sometimes there might be some bruising. But there is no pain. This is called "*cutipado*". It is as though the plant itself is harming you. It is as if that medicine you took, has turned to poison. We call that "*shitana* of the plant herself". And you get welts, allergies … You go to the doctor, you take a pill, but it doesn't ease, it keeps flaring up even more. It might go away for a time, then it comes back. And so on. It goes away, returns, until it comes back stronger. It is a lot of responsibility for us too. And that is why we end the *dieta* with chilli and salt. And that is why we chant the *arcana* afterwards, so that the *dieta* does not advance any further. Because we know that once they leave here, they are going to eat something, on the plane, wherever. We try to protect them.

It is possible to cross a *dieta* without realising. That is accidental. In that case the doctor of the plant[136] can be called, chanted to, explaining the error and that it was accidental. And it can be aligned in this way. It is more serious when you know but you do it anyway. It is like when I have given a patient a *dieta*, and I have chanted to them. And I say, "Now don't get angry", but she doesn't respect that, even though she has my *ícaro* and she starts to get angry, consciously, moreover, because I have told her. Then she

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131 *Calathea Allouia (Marantaceae).*
132 Also known as "*Floripondio*" (*Datura Inoxia, Solanaceae*)
133 The *piñón blanco* and the *piñón colorado* (Jatropha *Curcas* and *Jatropha gossypiifolia, Euphorbiaceae*).
134 *Couroupita guianensis (Lecythidaceae)*
135 *Ficus trigona*, (*Moraceae*)
136 José refers here to the "doctors" of the plants, in the same way as in other moments he talks about "mothers" or "owners". They are part of the plants, guardians, agents, are conscious, capable of caring, or curing, of teaching and of doing harm.

will get sick, in one way or another. And if another time she wants the *ícaro* and I give it to her again, and she does it again, then the plant will not let go of her as quickly. It is like catching a delinquent. The first time they have no criminal record. They commit an error, but they didn't realise. But if they catch them a second time, then it is more serious. They already know they are doing it. That is where the work to overcome the error has to be done more deeply.

"For the patients, the *pruebas* are their resistances to the healing"

You have spoken a lot about your need to respect your dietas *and to not cross your* dietas *within your work as a* curandero. *Are the* pruebas *that come to the patients and to those who start doing* dieta *comparable to what you experience?*

There is an important difference between the *pruebas* experienced by patients and by a person who is already learning, and the *pruebas* experienced when you are working as a *curandero*. For the patients, the *pruebas* are their resistances to the healing. Like when some say, "Ah, I have come here but I feel worse; I feel as though I am not going to come out of this, this work is no good". This can be seen in relation to the meals, for example, the food: "I am very skinny, I am lacking protein, the doctor said my haemoglobin levels might be going down, my levels of something or other might be going down, I have to eat in a different way". These resistances can also be seen when they look for conflict with the facilitator or with the *curandero*. "I don't see you as having good energy; I don't like your chanting, I don't like the way you look at me", or rather, the resistance is that which stops the patient from making progress in the treatment, so they don't feel like receiving the *ícaro*. A very common and very strong resistance is behaving as though this were a drug. "I don't like this, I am not entering the *mareo*, I need something stronger". As if you can heal yourself just by taking something strong.

"For the *curanderos* it is different"

For the *curanderos* it is different, and truly I have seen many *curanderos* (many of whom have now disappeared, above all men) who had learned well and then they crossed their *dietas* and they became ill or died. I am thinking of one who was from Lima. He learned to give ayahuasca, to chant a little in Shipibo. He chanted really well. And I am thinking of another who had also learned and chanted really well. These are *curanderos* who turned this work into pure business. One of them used to say that he could now dominate ayahuasca and he would mix it with *san pedro*[137]. And he offered musical sessions, as if he was on a stage. He had a front row, and a second row and whoever paid the most was in the front row, whoever paid the least was in the second row and the volunteers were in the third row. So, first of all they would take *san pedro*, and on the third day they would take ayahuasca. And so it went until he became ill. Before he died, he called me and said, -"Come and help me! What you told me is true. The plants are punishing me. And he said to me, "Look after my son because I am leaving him". And well, I didn't go to see him, because I was really busy. And two weeks later I heard that he had passed away. And many have died in this way: because of playing with the master plants. That's why I always say, "if you cross your *dieta* nothing will happen to you the day after, or a month or a year after. But as the years go by the consequences will come".

And this is what happens with a lot of gringos who come to experiment, to investigate, but they want to learn everything, and they have no respect. They think that they know about ayahuasca, and they don't even know the first thing about it. They say, "I already know how it works; I already know how you do it." That type of gringo goes somewhere else, and they present

[137] *Echinopsis Pachanoi*. A cactus also known as *"uachuma"or "wachuma" or "aguacolla"*.

themselves as specialists there, the knowledgeable ones. If you say something to them, they answer you straight away. They are quite strong people and are very resistant, but from their place of ignorance. And I think that dealing with a master plant in this way is the most incorrect thing you can do. It shows a lack of respect. And the worst thing about that is not seeing or accepting their own errors. That is why the master plants show and give *pruebas*, so that you can correct errors. And that is also why it is really tricky giving apprenticeship *dietas* to gringos unless they have understood things well. I can't give them serious knowledge, if I don't know how they are going to manage it or whether they can manage it. It is like giving a weapon to a child. He is going to think it is a toy. They want this strength, they want powers, they want protection, but for what reason? So that they can say, "I have a weapon and so nobody can come near me".

"If you talk about certain *pruebas* with other people, it is like crossing your *dieta*, your promise, your word"

Does the possibility of healing with plants, of doing dieta *with plants, depend on the belief that you have in them, or the fact of believing that plants are also spirits? Or the strength you believe that the plants have? Or the faith you put into them while doing* dieta*?*

It has nothing to do with faith, belief, religion, or ego, or pride, or economic power. 98% of foreigners come here with a lack of trust. Many even come with no belief in God, with no belief in anything, as if there was no meaning to life. They come like robots, mentally prepared and programmed. This idea of "having faith", I hear it more often among local people, from the Amazon region itself, or people from the city: from people who come from a

churchgoing family, or from political meetings and many other places. But I don't believe in that.

How can the pruebas *be understood and identified outside of being an act of belief?*

The *pruebas* are very personal. As a *curandero*, I cannot share much about that. If you talk about certain *pruebas* with other people, it is like crossing your *dieta*, your promise, your word; it is like the plants themselves ask you for secrecy. So, if you talk, then you have not kept your word, you have not had that integrity.

For example, if a plant says to me: "Disappear for the whole morning, use any excuse, but nobody must know what you are going to do; don't say anything, just do it" then I might let you down if you are paying me for a *dieta* and I disappear. Obviously, you are going to think the worst of me: that I am irresponsible, a liar, you will feel as though you have been tricked, betrayed, but that is because the gringo does not respect, or know about, or understand how this works. That is why they say that the *curanderos* are really unstable and that they don't keep their word or have any integrity.

What must be understood is that for those of us,
like myself, who work with the plants,
nothing is programmed,
things fit into place according to messages,
visions;
messages in dreams,
indications from the spirits of the plants.

In the old days, the *onanya* or *meraya* never lived within a family, they lived alone, and there were no demands on them from anyone saying, "hey, you have to do this now, you have to heal my son right now". They did a healing, a piece of work, a ceremony,

when they knew that it was the right time. For someone to understand that, they have to do *dieta*. No scientific study is going to enable you to understand this. So that you can say, "yes, that is true, you are right, that's the way it is. You have to experience it through your *dieta*".

"If we don´t do what the plants tell us, that can seriously hurt us"

For both the curandero *and the patients, getting through the* pruebas *is a question of trust and commitment with the plants. And the strongest commitment for the* curandero *is with his plants: he has to do what the plants demand. The other commitments are secondary; they have to be adaptable.*

It is important for gringos to understand this. Because when they don't understand, they judge. For example, in a *dieta* with *ayahuma*[138], which has that strong energy, the plant said to me, "you must not approach that particular patient, who is doing *dieta*, because her very energy and mental *prueba* will make her get angry with you" and she shouldn't get angry because she is doing *dieta* and that would make her cross it. And it would also shock me[139]. "It is better if she gets angry when you are far away so that you don't feel it". It was one of those *dietas* that include words, and thoughts.[140] And often the *maestro* who was working with me would say, "now that person is sick, she has a stomach ache, or a headache, she is crying, she is saying that she wants you to go and see her" and I would say to him, "you attend to her", because I had to keep my word to not approach her until a particular day because if I got close to her, all my work would turn to nothing. If not, that would have shocked me and also the other person, in another way. In a week we could both be ill.

[138] *Couroupita guianensis, Lecythidaceae*

[139] See Glossary for an explanation of the translation of the Spanish verb "chocar" with "to shock" in English.

[140] This refers to not crossing the *dieta* at any moment, either with your words or your thoughts. This is considered to be a more demanding level of *dieta*.

Here it doesn't matter how you become ill, whether you have an accident, or whether you fall, what is important is that you will be ill in bed. Here during the *dieta*, when you cross the *dieta*, it is not possible to either distinguish, see, or know, what kind of setback it is. Because becoming ill is just that: a setback or a *prueba*.

And it also depends on the kind of *dieta* cross. That has to be looked at to see what can be done. If the *curandero* cannot clean or remove it, then the healing will go deeper, and it could turn into an illness that lasts for years and years. It depends on how it materialises, where it gathers. It is always in the most sensitive part of the person and of their body. The crossing of a *dieta* can even kill. Many people have died because of this.

However, how you are going to become ill cannot be known. It could be an accident, a simple flu, it could be a simple fall, or incurable diseases that nobody understands. That is why at the start we call the crossing a setback: you are going about your life beautifully, then something comes and delays all your plans, all the things you wanted to do. When it is the flu or it is a headache, that is when you cross with your mind; when you cross with food, stomach aches arrive. The greatest error is sex, that makes you cross with everything.

When you ingest a plant and you receive an *ícaro*, you enter a delicate space. Crossing is not respecting that space and what it demands of you. For example, I have to prepare myself really well to receive an *ícaro* from my mum, because her *dieta* is very delicate. If I am going to receive her *ícaro* I have to think well and prepare myself well to be able to respect her *ícaro* and to take it with responsibility. Or rather, I know that my mother is going to give me her *ícaro* with all her good intention so that I get better. If I don't comply, I am going to feel worse. That is to say, in addition to the fact that I could become ill by crossing, my situation could become worse. That is why when I want her *ícaro* I have to think

about it well. And these are the commitments that I also make when preparing a remedy.

There is also a difference between the demands of energetic and mental work in managing ceremonies and the demands of work harvesting plants and preparing them. When it is a case of harvesting and preparing plants, things are a little stricter: there are moments when you can't hug your son, or your daughter, there are moments when you have to be in silence, when you mustn't activate even a minimal amount of your anger. There are days after the ceremony where there are signs. And when there are attacks there are also signs that you have to behave in a certain way, otherwise you activate the attack. It is a pretty wide-ranging and interminable world, where you keep learning day after day. And you learn when you don't comply, and you are sick and you realise, "wow, this is how this works, next time I will do better!".

"With sins you learn nothing, but with plants you can indeed learn"

Could we say that the crossing of a dieta *is an error and a* prueba*?*

In some ways, for a gringo, an error is nothing deep. Sometimes I use the word "sin" with them to give more gravity to the idea of an error. But the word "sin" comes from religion and comes from that mentality of, "you have sinned, God will judge you". As if there is no solution, there is no turning back, no reparation, you can only be punished, so there is no learning. With sins nothing is learned, with plants you can indeed learn. The plants also punish, but to show you how to learn, how to correct. There are two levels to this. One thing is when the plants show you something so that you don't do it. In other words, they show you how to do things well and that is when, let us say, you are

"correcting". But if you have done something that is bad, you cannot correct that easily, you have to "pass through it", to overcome it, so that you can correct it again and improve. Like a deep correction. To be able to correct, you have to overcome, and this overcoming is called *pruebas*. A *prueba* implies work; long, difficult and slow work. If you are dedicated to that, you see it and you do it. But if you aren't dedicated, you continue to carry it and to feed what you are carrying. And many human beings prefer material things like work, or things we want to have, and we worry less about our health and our soul, about being clean, aligned. We leave that for later. If someone talks to me about that I react by saying, "Ok, but I am well, I don't need anything. I look well, I have a head, feet, I walk, I laugh, I dance. There's nothing wrong with me". You know about your error, it is in your life, but you don't dedicate yourself to healing it.

Normally, as a young person, you don't feel anything, some people perhaps have a more sensitive body, yes, but malaise comes with age. When we are young, we don't feel hardly anything, not even from our own errors, from the negative things that we do. I mean, we feel that we have an invincible power, to earn, achieve, dream and do everything. However, to achieve this we have to have a clear path, conscience, not only ourselves but also our parents, our ancestors; our actions shape the way that our children's futures develop. It is about how we plant seeds; first how we have planted them, how they have planted us and then how we maintain the fruit and leaves.

In other words, if we ourselves do not look after them, if we leave everything unkempt, there will be weeds and cobwebs everywhere. How do you think we are going to plant something good, something beautiful, that can grow, as though it was injected with all its sweetness, like when a mango falls from a tree and you eat it. Here we still have this technique or these plants, to be able to do cleaning work, not just personal but also thinking of the wellbeing of others. To be honest, sometimes in an ayahuasca

vision, when you are doing *dieta*, your mum or dad appear, or your son, uncle, brother, sister, neighbour, sister-in-law, all those people to whom you are connected. Because you are helping them with this *dieta* work that you are doing. There is a reason why those people pass through your mind. That is when you realise that you are not even thinking about that person and suddenly, they are there by your side, they are in your vision, in your mind. You are going towards another thing you want to see, but people pass through who you have not even thought about during the day. Because in one way or another that strength comes through cleaning. And the work during a *dieta* is like that. Cleaning and also forgiveness. At times the person who has done you the most harm appears. When your mind is prepared, you can feel pity: that poor person that did me harm.

"When the error has already been committed, it is like a padlocked dungeon"

Many foreigners search out thousands of treatments, psychological therapies, everything to do with their mind. The majority of those who come to do this work are at that point. But when the error has already been committed, it is as though the person is in a tunnel, without a staircase to climb to get out. It is like a well with no way out. If you try and get out, you fall down. And it is clearly visible when a patient arrives like that, with a lot of *ucha*[141].

Ayahuasca can show you that in different ways. And when you chant to it, it comes. But you have to know how to interpret and we do this through the chants. Our work in this case is finding out how to get the person out of there. But to achieve this, you have to

[141] This word will appear a number of times in the final chapters of this book. It refers to something that José also calls "the energy of the error". Also see Glossary

chant it from the main point of their error. From there, you start asking for things. It is quite difficult to explain this. Because when you have these errors, it is as though your mind gets tangled up. You want to think about other things and then suddenly you come back; you think for a while, then once again you come back. It is as if there is no exit, it is like you are trapped in that darkness, and we are talking about the energetic part, the spiritual part of yourself. They are things that are locked in, you could say. Like a padlocked dungeon without a key, you don't know how to open it, you don't know how to get out of there. You try; you strike out. We strike out at ourselves sometimes, we criticise ourselves, we destroy ourselves. It is as if the value, strength, trust and faith in ourselves disappear, the love for ourselves disappears. And you simply foster the negative within yourself, you feel as though people don't like you, you feel that life is going badly for you, that life has no meaning. And living like that has no meaning. Because you eat out of obligation, you live out of obligation. You want to die but you are also afraid. Sometimes you want to die but when you are about to die you are afraid. These things affect everything, and all of that is because of an error. Because that is where the mental or emotional problem lies, the problem that often stops you from focusing on your work. That is to say, imagine when you are well, you want to make everything beautiful, you are keen, but when there is one of those blockages, you get low; you aren't doing what you know how to do, your mind is in another place and because of that, you can't concentrate. That has to be cleaned. And that alignment comes through doing *dieta*. It is like strengthening the mind so that it can settle down. Because if you don't do this, you will always be living on that wavelength. Until you let go of that energy, you can let go of a person, but when you go with another person, you find the same thing happens again. Until you let go, definitively, life keeps giving you the same thing, or will even give you worse, or will give you the opposite, but the opposite of the same thing. That is why these cleaning techniques exist: not only ayahuasca. There are many ways of cleaning, or of trying to harmonise in order to let go definitively.

Until you let go, you will not live in freedom. A gringo once came and said to me "Maybe I can go really far away and forget about all of this. Perhaps I can separate from my wife and get something better for myself" and I said to him, "no, this is like Covid: wherever you go it will get hold of you. It doesn't matter about race, colour, sex, or anything" I told him. The only thing that matters is your decision to do the work.

"It is not about achieving your intention in the sense of "obtaining what you want"

You have already spoken about how neither ayahuasca nor the master plants have an intention. Humans are the ones who bring the intention. At the same time, the word "intention" can often be heard among foreign patients. "To go and do dieta *or to go and take ayahuasca, you have to have an intention. You have to know why you are choosing this".*

There are many patients who come here, with the intention of wanting to change, of wanting to learn. Many have that intention, but then they shut themselves off. Something comes that blocks them and they shut off, they want to leave, they no longer want to do anything. The main foundation here is patience. Without patience you will never gain anything. Or rather, you can gain something quickly, but it will also go away again quickly.

And the theme of the intention can also be tricky. Because a person has thousands of intentions: whether they be intentions to live better, to buy an iPhone, to eat well, to travel, to do projects, to study, to be more beautiful, more lovely … A thousand intentions that we have every day. But when you do this kind of work, if you want to this kind of cleaning, it is as if things work out in the way

they have to work out. And perhaps that means accepting our errors, improving our personality, or our character, our way of being, lying a bit less, being clearer, etc. And that starts to fit together, beautifully. The intention guides you and then it is like everything starts fitting together, as though things are settling down in their place. And here the important point is that you become well.

It is not therefore about achieving your intention in the sense of "obtaining what you want": that a particular person is or is not by your side, that you do or don't have the work you wanted. That is not what matters. Instead, when you do this work, in my experience, it is as if you were standing up, you get to stand where you like to be standing, where you feel nourished by yourself, where you feel joy. You feed yourself with that joy. But you are not comparing yourself: before I was like that, now I am better. Before you would say, I am better because I live in New York, and I am more successful. But now, you feel joyful with everyone, no matter where you live, no matter what you do. You can live in New York, or you can come and live here and feel better cultivating your yucca crop, your plantains or having a swimming pool. You simply get to the point where you feel really happy with yourself.

Chapter 9

The *arcana*

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The *Arcana*

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Introduction
"The *arcana*"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

At the end of a *dieta*, or at the end of an ayahuasca ceremony, before the work concludes, the *arcana* is received. At this stage in the dialogues, we are perhaps more accustomed to hearing José say that the *arcana* is a *dieta*, that it is a chant and at the same time an energy, or a root. The *arcana* is human work but is done with plants. And the *arcana* functions like a protection.

Although we may be accustomed to hearing about these matters, Jose also reminds us that this type of knowledge is carried inside and emerges from our own experience. This knowledge is so embodied that, from the point of view of the mind or of what can be put into words and into explanations, it may seem enigmatic and at times incomprehensible.

The *arcana*, like the *dieta*, is both a noun and a verb, an agent and a qualifying adjective. An *onanya* can put an *arcana* in place and can also "*arcanear*" (act within the *arcana*, as a verb). An *arcana* reacts, transmits messages, works by itself, and at the same time individuals and *dietas* can carry an *arcana* or receive an *arcana*. The *arcana* "is made and is hidden", it can be "turned into air" José explains, because its role is to act without being seen. Its invisibility is part of the way in which it protects.

José insists on specifying that the *arcana* is a chant in the same way that all Shipibo traditional work is a chant. The *arcana*, like ayahuasca, has levels and intensities according to the *dietas* of whoever is chanting it. It is learned, but it is not completely understood, because it is invisible, and it is a secret. The *arcana* can therefore be learned, but without seeing either where it comes from or how it emerges. There are also different types of *arcanas*

according to the plants who are part of a person's *dieta*: the *arcanas* of strong trees are different to the *arcanas* of medicinal plants (bushes). Another important differentiation exists between the arcanas that are put in place for patients, to try and protect them from their own *dieta* crosses, (to mediate the reaction of the plant in the *dieta* when it is crossed) and the *arcanas* that the *onanya* carry.

Discussing the *arcana*, leads us once more to the subject of "attacks". In the past, the *curanderos* fought each other according to the strength of their *arcanas*: he who had the stronger *arcana* or more *dietas*, "knocked the other one over". In this environment of battles between experts, nobody was able to learn on their own, and so the elders' *arcanas* protected those who were learning. At the same time, these battles offer a different view of Indigenous peoples' territories and their boundaries, as they show that between different ethnicities there were codes of respect and non-intrusion, including in spaces of medicine and of apprenticing.

José takes a certain distance from this "old" method of showing strength through confrontation and of "going in to look at the learning of others ". He does this by clarifying another type of difference within what protections are and how we can use protection. Protections which emerge "from within" are differentiated from protections that function like a boundary, in line with a static image of a territory, based on the demarcation between an inside and an outside.

The protection which comes from within is a result of cleaning oneself. As José explains, you get attacked in your vulnerable point, and your vulnerable point is where your unresolved errors are found. This "within", where unresolved errors can accumulate, includes family lineage, and territorial and historical collectives. Maintaining inner strength, through constant cleaning processes and by exercising integrity, therefore works as a protection which emerges from the same depths where illnesses come from, and where seeds can be planted. They are rooted in the same ground. However, protection is not configured

as a demarcation line guarded with defensive weapons. Using images, José shares that protection is like alignment and that alignment is that which grows when weeds are removed from the root.

On the subject of this type of protection, José also points out a modern societal characteristic, where it has become normal to think of protection as a boundary that has to be defended with weapons. Here, different images confront one another, related to what can protect, from areas of land which have been cleared and cultivated from the root, to military protection. The conversations in this chapter end with José's testimony about working with British war veterans, professionals in armed protection. He speaks about the fear he feels when he "goes into the veterans' worlds". Working with veterans also reinforces the need to treat the patients' ingestion of ayahuasca with precaution and restates the idea of the *onanya* proposing treatments using only their chants. This once more challenges the habitual idea of what a "remedy" is. Here the remedy is not taken but received, in the form of chanting.

"The *arcana* is a *dieta*"

Perhaps we could talk a little about the arcana *and about how you have been redesigning the idea of protections and defences...*

The word "*arcana*" comes to us from religion but is often used nowadays; it is part of how our own way of speaking has been transformed. Putting an *arcana* in place means protecting. It is put in place through the *ícaro*, another word that comes from outside. The *arcana* is a *dieta*. That is, you learn it during the *dietas*, to protect your body, your mind, your energy, your spirit, your dreams, and your path. So that errors do not happen. And if something happens, the *arcana* is there so that these energies don't shock you[142]. When you have been given an *arcana*, it is as though

[142] See Glossary for an explanation of the translation of the Spanish verb "chocar" with "to shock" in English.

the protection itself guides you. It can stop you. And you realise instead that things that were going to happen, don't happen.

"IT IS AS THOUGH THERE IS SOMEONE WHO WARNS YOU THAT SOMETHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN"

There are also levels of *arcanas*: a *curandero's arcana* is very different to the *arcana* that is put in place for those who have no *dieta*. To learn the *arcana*, you more or less need to have a practice, a *dieta* of 2 or 3 years. And that does not mean that you are going to do *dieta* 3 years running. You have to accumulate it little by little, together with the strongest things, or with the most difficult trees. More than anything, the elements of fire and air are needed. Water and earth are not as needed. When you handle a good *arcana* as a *curandero*, that energy, that root is in your body. When something is about to happen, your body lets you know. So, you sit down, and you blow *soplo*. You have to wait for half an hour, one hour. If nothing happens, you leave. But if you continue (and that has happened to me many times, really, many times) then something does happen. It is a sensation. I feel it in my arm. It is as though someone is warning you that something is going to happen. Or, in the Amazonian context, there are little birds like *chixca* that come and warn you. You have to hear it three times before something serious happens. The first time, it is something light: you might get a flat tyre, you might get stuck somewhere with your car broken down; the second time, it is a bit more violent; the third time, then it is something more serious.

Putting the *arcana* in place is done after a *dieta*, for example, to give protection. To put down an intention for everything to go well. And if bad things have to appear, the *arcana* itself takes it away,

liberates it so that the person can keep going well, on their way. Obviously, things won't be lovely every day, but serious things will not happen to you. If they do happen, they will not knock you down. Because something is protecting you. That is the *arcana*. The same *arcana* rejects negative people who really want bad things for you and who should not be in your world. And it also makes people come into your world who should be around you. Of course, in every life there will always be people who do not fit with or are not aligned with you, but what the *arcana* does is stop really negative or serious things from happening, things that could make us fall into a tunnel.

The *arcana* is a chant, all traditional work in the Shipibo world is a chant

Is the arcana *a chant?*

Yes, it is a chant, all traditional work in the Shipibo world is a chant. Without chanting there is nothing. It is something energetic. The chant is the key. You create the *arcana* and then you hide it. That is why this knowledge is very difficult to understand. You hide it so that nobody can see it. Not even those who read the tarot, or those who read the coca leaves, other *ayahuasqueros*, or people who practice the occult sciences. You hide it well. You turn it into air. And to learn this knowledge, years of *dieta* are required. And the *arcana* will also have the strength of your *dietas*. The *arcana* has intensities, it is like an energetic field that you put in place.

And can we keep feeding our arcana *after a* dieta*? In the same way that we continue to cultivate a relationship with the plant that we have done* dieta *with?*

With the *arcana*, like with the plants, there are levels, and you never stop learning. It is simply like charging a battery. You do *dieta* and then you raise yourself up, charge yourself up, or you give more strength to your *ícaro*, to your *arcanas*, to all your *dietas*. You recharge it all. Your chant has more strength, your word has more strength, your vision becomes clearer. Let's imagine an engine with a low battery, there will be days when you will need someone to push you so that you can start your car. On the other hand, when the battery is charged, it starts quickly. And when your battery is low, you need other *maestros* to help you do good work.

Does the arcana *have a shape? You said that it is principally fire and air. Could an* arcana *be drawn?*

No, that is why it is called an *arcana*. There are little things that even we don't understand. Because it is protection. It is invisible, transparent. And that is what we try to learn. In Shipibo the *arcana* is called *paná*. It means "protection" or "to hide". Its very name says what it is: a secret. It is yours. You will never share it. It is what you know, but you don't know either where it came from or how it came to be. It sometimes appears in a ceremony. But if you want to think about it, give it a shape, paint it, the idea does not come.

"It is humans who create the *arcana*"

What is the relationship between the arcanas *and the plants? Do the plants have an* arcana*? Or can they have one? Does ayahuasca, for example, have an* arcana*?*

There is no logic to your question. It is humans who create the *arcana*. Look at the *arcana* of the United States, the best weapon in the world. The best army in the world.

Is a country's army an arcana*?*

Well, it is an example. There are two kinds also in this case. An *arcana* used to defend oneself or protect oneself and an *arcana* used to attack. As my grandfather used to say, that costs. It is one thing to learn the *arcana* of strong trees, of poisonous trees, trees that have a very dark energy. That can be used to defend oneself or to attack. And it is another thing to learn the *arcanas* of medicinal plants, of aromatic plants, or love plants, as they are called. There is also a difference between the *arcana* that can be put into people that you are healing and the *arcanas* of the *curanderos* or the *onanya* that are taking on the role of healing people. And that is the first thing you learn about in this medicine practice. Because in the Amazonian Indigenous environment, if a person comes with "*brujería*", or with *shitana*, you first have to fight with the other person, and that fight will not be with the good *arcanas*. You are not going to fight with something sensitive, you are going to fight with something strong. You have to go in with the whole army, with all your *dietas*, with all your strength. It is a combat. Over who has the most knowledge, the most strength. And for this reason, in the past they used to finish each other off. The one who knew the most lived, the one who had the most *dieta*. Whoever has the most *dieta*, or has started doing *dieta* the earliest, will automatically beat the other one. Because you guide yourself and you look at what errors the other has, and that is where you attack, without the need for combat.

"The war within ayahuasca"

In the past, those who knew how, fought. The *onanya* and the *yobe* learned when they were children. They had that strength. And they used pretty strong things back then. They didn't just defend themselves; they attacked. So, the young people who were

learning had to be under the protection of those who had a lot of *dietas*. That is why they had to have their *maestro*. They couldn't do *dieta* on their own. Those who say "I learned on my own with my plants" are lying. Even today, if anyone knows that you are doing *dieta*, all the others start testing you. They look for you. That is why the *maestro* is there, to protect that child who is doing *dieta* and learning. That is the war within ayahuasca. And when you do *dieta*, you feel this very clearly. It is like a thunderclap. And as a curious person you say, "where does that light or that strength come from? Why does it shine?" The elders know, "ah, they are doing *dieta* there, someone is learning well, is growing in strength". Someone who knows this well, automatically knows where someone is doing doing *dieta*. Because that appears in the ayahuasca. Because the Shipibo People is small, in terms of *curandero* practice.

Do you not see people who are doing dieta *if they are from another ethnicity? Do you only see other Shipibo who are doing* dieta*? What about your neighbours the Asháninka for example*

The Shipibo and Asháninka manage this well. The truth is that Asháninka and Shipibo never interfere in one another's business. Each in their own territory with their own knowledge.

Are there territories within these energies for learning with the plants?

There are territories. There are open practices, but there are also secrets. And between Shipibo People and Asháninka People we respect that. And that is how it was in the past: they had no choice but to learn the defences and the protections and the strong *arcanas*. And that strong *arcana* was called *paná*. It is learned by doing *dietas* with strong trees in which you learn to work from the root, work that we call *mexa*. You had to enter that dark world to be able to master it, to know all the techniques: how they begin and how they function.

"The protection that comes from healing"

What does it mean to master?

To master means to understand well. Connecting is also understanding well. Aligning means going deeper. You cannot say: "I am aligning myself", instead, aligning yourself means starting to go deeper. When you align something that is crossed, you have to go deeper into it, excavate, to be able to align it. And when someone is in a well, to align them, you can get them out of the well in a superficial way, the first time: it is not as though I give them a rope and I say, "come on, get out of there". If you got them out just like that, all in one go, the whole well would cave in. You have to go in more deeply. The patient themself has to excavate, break it all down, and understand. That is aligning. The gringo thinks that alignment is "wow, they are aligning me in a beautiful way!".

I think that they associate the word align, with the image of a line. And it seems to me that the gringo mentality has a particular relationship with lines. Like the plants in plantations, all in line, ordered, productive, and totally controlled.

I understand. And it is not a line. Perhaps in this case we can also try to look for another word. In the word "connect" perhaps they also see a line, like the connection with an electrical socket. Perhaps they think, "he plugs me in, and I charge myself up and that's it". But connecting is also going in deeper. And going in deeper is like going right down to the root. It is called "*mexa mexa*" in Shipibo, which is like pulling up yucca from the roots. Going in deeper is digging up a plant from the roots so that you can plant something new on the same piece of land. And to be able to plant something more beautiful, you have to put down some compost, clear the ground well, make a little hole to fit what you are going to

plant. All of that is done by the *ícaro* and the *dieta*. To go deeper you have to take out the old things: traumas, errors and all those things. You have to pull it all out. And when you pull it out, then they feel that peace, that tranquillity.

Now, the work of alignment is the work of the gringo themself, of maintaining, sustaining that seed that has already been planted. And that is the famous post-*dieta*. And when the post-*dieta* ends, that does not mean that you can do what you want. You have to keep maintaining that seed until it grows, until flowers bloom, the roots go deeper, the trunk gets thicker. Once that has been well maintained, things can happen to you, but you don't fall down, and you see a difference in your own actions. You learn to distinguish types of energies. You feel that when someone speaks unkindly to you, it no longer matters to you. If before when you heard some gossip you would start to cry, it no longer matters to you. If, before, you were easy to anger, now you don't feel like that as often. And you see these changes. You feel sad when they shout at you, but instead of getting activated, instead of increasing that energy that comes from others, you want to calm them down. You see in a different way: more passively. You become a better mother, a better woman, a better human being. You think differently. And that is also a protection. The protection that comes from healing.

But in reality, we are also born with protection.
In a way, life simply traumatises us
and this makes all our beliefs disappear, and our ways of living, and of expressing ourselves, and all the kinds of freedom
that showed us how to protect ourselves.
These are other ways of protecting ourselves.
When it is the political and economic systems that
are in charge of our protection, then it is as though our own ways of protecting ourselves disappear.

Listening to you today, more than ever before, I see the west as a great theatre of war.

Exactly. It is a world where the protections are dark. Everything is war. Even the houses have alarms. That is, we don't practice or hold onto our real protection, which comes from the very place that we must take care of. We only take care of our exterior. External protection. Our body on the outside: sunblock, fly repellent, but what about our soul?

The protector of our conscience is not sold in pharmacies!

And often our spirits are sad, crouched over, uncared for. We don't care for this part first, even though that is where life is.

Experience with veterans

Recently, you have started to give dieta *to war veterans from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. What knowledge have you needed in that work with regards to this question of defences and protections?*

Well, until now, just four veterans have come to *Shipibo Rao*. This year 15 more were going to come. That didn't happen because of Covid. It is heavy work, risky and dangerous. Not only in terms of the ayahuasca, but also physically. Because when they come, they are really ground down, their mind and their brain. And I need to hire six more people for security. I mean, I myself need armed protection when they come because it gets really rough. They are in a world full of guilt and of judgement towards themselves, towards their parents, towards the government, towards everything. When they get older, they realise. When they are trapped by time. In their case it is as if they were programmed, trained for this. They go into the army to defend their country, but

they also go in for their own family members, for their parents. "I am a soldier; I want you to be a soldier". For Peru, for the United States, for whatever reason. It is like entering a world of black magic. You start off well, but at the end of the day you end up making pacts, and the pacts are deaths. Once you start killing, you like killing. Killing a human being becomes the same as killing a chicken. And unfortunately, you can see that the destiny of these people was meant to be different. But their own family, whether their mother or father, or their lineage, pressure them to enter that world. And knowing very well that the protections and the *arcanas* of those countries are full of darkness. As my grandfather used to say, "Satan is in charge there". They create many ways to programme their minds. With pills, hormones, chemicals, so that their mind starts transforming and they don't feel any resentment, or any sadness. They try to constantly feed them in that way. They convert them into killing machines. That is what has strength there, those pacts of blood and death. And a pact is like an error: once they start to kill, they feel proud of killing more. "While I can continue to kill, I feel good", and then they give them more power. And that is when the mind and the power take over, totally disconnected from their hearts. "The more I kill, the better I feel". It is like a professional career. Of course, killing can be professional. Not everyone will go to fight in a war. Or if they say to them, "kill that family, kill that family in *Shipibo Rao*", they come and, farewell! They are mentally prepared for it. And in that space lives the evil spirit governing human beings, encouraging them to do bad things. It lives there, where the person lives who has the most power and the strength to destroy. In other words, the aim of that spirit is to destroy human beings or humanity.

And when they become conscious of this, either due to age, or when they leave the army, they are already really trapped. They become "veterans" when they can't do it anymore. While they continue, they are "soldiers" but those who arrive here, it is because something has made them crumble, and when they crumble, the

myth also crumbles, whether it be about the defence of your country, or the pride of your family. When their family members become afraid of them, that is really terrible for them. They realise that there are very few people who will go the distance with them. Wanting them and loving them until the end. And when that crumbles, then they really realise who is with them by their side, who stays. And they come here with that loneliness. And their sadness also comes to the fore when they think: "before I was like this, when I was working, they all felt proud of me". They cry because of that. "Now I am an animal" they often said to me, "I am a disaster, worse than an animal".

And the experience for veterans is that they don't sleep. It is as if they become "psychotic", I mean, they are in their own house and they think they are still at war. A caretaker from here shone a light on a veteran who was doing *dieta* and the veteran almost killed him because he was preparing a stick with a sharpened end … he already had three spears ready and, in his dreams, he thought people were looking for him to kill him. They live like that: they don't sleep. That same man told me that he could hear the cries of the families he had killed. He saw blood. He didn't sleep. And when he came here, it had already been three years since he had slept. His family threw him out because it was like he was crazy; he separated from his wife; his family members were afraid. He told me that in his house if he slept for five minutes, he would start to run, saying, "they are following me, they want to kill me", looking for his weapon. It was madness.

And this work is not so medicinal at the beginning. Another kind of *ícaro* has to be offered because firstly those evil spirits have to be eliminated. You have to go against them. And it is strong stuff. When they were doing *dieta* here for three months, there were workers from the centre who did not want to sleep here, they were afraid. Just one of the workers stayed, the others went to sleep elsewhere and came back in the morning. They were afraid of

that energy. And what I saw when I chanted to them, is that they are really trapped. I chanted and I felt that fear that a thousand demons would come. That strength. That strength of terrifying things. I felt so much fear at the moment of the ceremony! So, the work with veterans is more than anything about cleaning all of that and then detoxifying, both their brain and their body, with saunas as well as *ícaros*, to be able to combat all of that energy. Work with veterans is very heavy and very dangerous. And really delicate. Because you cannot activate too many *pruebas*, otherwise they might react too severely. Truthfully, they make you feel sorry for them. Really sorry. They are full of burden, they don't know what to do. They are broken, as they themselves say. They don't ever laugh. They are like programmed robots. Everybody in the kitchen was afraid. Their very energy, their shape, their appearance. It was only after two months, that one of them laughed. His first laugh. I remember it well.

Chapter 10

Futures

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Introduction
"Futures"

Silvia Mesturini Cappo

José explores the risks associated with an ayahuasca that foreigners have taken over, an ayahuasca that is being "*taken to another world*", transformed by people who often think they know better and they know more than traditional knowledgeable men and women. We return to images of old ways of living, of lost freedoms and of the elders' prophecies. José speaks about "*this time which we have entered*": a time in which the mothers and guardians of the rainforest lands and beings have had to leave and go to places where humans cannot follow. The elders used to speak about how freedoms were going to be lost; freedoms to eat and drink water from the river, and to go out and roam around the forest. They spoke of a future of wars, great extinctions, pollution, deforestation and material slavery. Those who heard them, could not understand what they were talking about, because it was so far removed from their way of life.

Within the landscape of the multiple current extractions (extraction of wood, oil, gas, gold and the new "brown gold", namely ayahuasca), José invites us to see and feel these extractions as a lack of respect. And in the same vein, we are invited to wish for another kind of future, to dream of another future, to do what is necessary to embody another kind of future. As the elders used to say, "*if you confront them, you will not be able to win, but don't do what they do*". José's proposals which have been put into words in this book, and the very fact of him wanting to write this book, offer an example of how to embody, in the present day, futures that are less extractive and destructive, perhaps slower, maybe difficult, but always aimed towards healing.

"Lived experience is reality, otherwise it´s just stories"

The way you behave and maintain your integrity with the plants is the most important thing. It is important to understand that to cross is to betray and that knowledge is found by going in deeper; so that when the *maestro* leaves, the knowledge stays with you. Nowadays there is a technical superficiality, a technicality in medicine: people want to learn how to blow *soplo*, to chant, to prepare baths and saunas, to cook ayahuasca, but what is in the *soplo*? Blowing *soplo* is worth a hundred words if it is done with good *dietas*. And the words themselves have to be words that come out of lived experience, because lived experience is reality, otherwise it's just stories. It is like wanting to give the gringo something ancient by telling them stories you have heard, but which speak about things that you yourself have not lived. It is as though you are renewing a story told by your dad or by your friends and you make people believe that you experienced it.

"Knowledge is in how you manage"

I have heard that there are people who have done *dieta* with plants here in the Amazon and now they have started to do *dieta* with other plants in other places, to begin recuperating this type of knowledge with plants. It is important to understand that if you want to do *dieta* with a sage plant you have to ask the sage plant for permission. You cannot go to a sage plant thinking that ayahuasca has given you permission to do that. It would be very gringo to think like that. Entering the spiritual world of the plants needs years of practice, dedication and *dieta*. Nor can you go and buy sage and start doing *dieta*; you have to ask permission and give offerings. And through that you start learning. If you take

ayahuasca, you might realise what you are learning. Maybe your hands can give massages, or your words become softer, and you know how to convince, your mind opens up, or your chants become finer. And through that you learn about the healing properties of the plant. Something more profound than the fact that sage heals the stomach. So, you can ask that plant for healing, and you ingest her … you do *dieta* and that plant starts helping you and healing you. Through your discipline you will feel the depth of healing from the plant. And as this happens you deepen your healing. But you have to keep your word: you have to commit, and you have to hold firm. And you have to take care; when you are giving a *dieta* to yourself it is really delicate! If you cross, you have to look for help from another person and there are no guarantees that they will be able to align you. Discovering the plants calls for a great deal of experience and dedication. But it is possible because ayahuasca, for us, is partly an investigation, partly a vision and partly a tool to connect and to see other plants.

Care must also be taken with mixing things. The gringo really likes mixing master plants, but each one has their mother, and it cannot be done just like that. I did *dieta* with marihuana for three months. I saw that she is a master plant, but I also saw that most people use her as a drug, as an addiction. Care must also be taken with *toé*[143] and tobacco. The master plants always have two sides. That is why you have to know how to manage them. Knowledge is in how you manage.

[143] A bush, also known as *floripondio* or *borrachero*, latin name *Burgmancia Suaveolens*.

"Everything my grandparents´grandparents talked about is now happening"

With regards to, I don't know whether the future or the present or the past, I think that a lot of people are really badly informed, and that maybe it is better like that, so that they don't fall into despair.

My grandparents spoke about what their grandparents had told them, and they said:

"Take advantage of the fact that there are still plantains and that there is food. If someone does not have food, it is because they are idle. There is still land to cultivate. Take advantage of the fact that the land is good, you sow a crop, and it gives you something to eat, and there are fish in the river pools. Because in the future there will be none. You will have to work hard for others, if you don't know how to fend for yourselves. You will have to get up at 5 in the morning, and you will live like slaves: receiving orders and with everything programmed, even what you eat and when you have to eat it. You will experience this. Now you are free here. You can eat once, or twenty times, if you want, you can walk, you can breathe pure air, drink pure water, go into the forest, jump and play about. Nobody controls you here. But a time will come when you will be monitored and programmed. White and mestizo people will come, people who don't speak our language, and they will empty the pools of fish. The animals that give the fish, the mother of the anaconda, *ronin*, will go far, far away. Because other people will come, and they will throw poison. And as they are very intelligent beings, they have already dug a tunnel under the earth so that they can leave. Because they already know".

And I realise that we have already entered that time. The fish that are left in the river pools are like the little hens that we eat from factory farms. The wild beasts that live for years and who sustain the pools, they know what is coming and what will come. And they go where humans can't go. Because there are enchanted places in the Amazon, places where you can't go, places outside of time. It is as if you want to go, but they don't let you in, a storm starts brewing and you can no longer get in. And people invent stories, saying that is where the Incas are, the Inca gold, or oil, or the world of the *Chullachaquis*[144] … but there are places where the guardians go, or the mothers, which is the same thing. The guardians of the rivers, of the forests, of the pools. When that guardian leaves, the pool dries up and there are no fish. For example, why do the rivers change course every year and eat up the crops? The guardians work to give more space, more land and more life to whatever is growing, resisting those who contaminate the waters. When the guardians disappear, then the water disappears. Because they are the ones who preserve it.

My grandparents also talked about *Ani Parro*, the sea, and they didn't know how big it was. We just heard that it had big waves and big ships. Before, it was not known about and now, we know about it and we bathe in it and enjoy it. They used to say, "first of all, they will destroy that. The source where water comes from. That will be contaminated. The big animals will die". And they exaggerated: animals the size of this community, they said. One kilometre in size. "Firstly, they will be exterminated by the white people", they said. "And then more will be contaminated, and the animals will die. And that will affect the rivers. Firstly, the waters will be contaminated and then there will be no more water. And the land will heat up. And there will be no food. It won't be possible to sow crops and food will be lacking. And many people will die of hunger. And those who have become rich from destroying, are the ones who will suffer first. Because their food will run out. We who

[144] Protectors of the rainforest.

live in these parts, we will be able to withstand it, but only if you stay in the communities. You will be protected here because these lands will be the last to disappear".

And this is happening. Everything my grandparents' grandparents talked about in relation to the medicine is now happening. And I am really worried for my children. That lack of power to be able to do something. But I think that with this knowledge, something can be done.

"But I think that with this knowledge, something can be done"

We never paid enough attention to the elders when they talked about this. We would laugh when they would talk about "giant bats with mouths of fire" but I understand now that they were talking about how the world was going to turn dark because of wars. The bats are war planes. Now I understand. The world is turning dark. And we never believed that there would be no fish and now the fish grow like hens in fish farms. Now we see those who put down poison to kill plagues and then they plant plantains there that are white and have no flavour. So, these lands no longer grow like before, and the people from the communities now buy plantains and salt fish that come from outside.

That is why the elders did not share ayahuasca, above all with gringos. The elders were afraid that it would be discovered. Nobody could reach them. They were very closed off. They did not trust.

They said that those from outside were going to take ownership of the medicine.
Not of the knowledge, because that can only be obtained through one's experience.
But they could take ownership of the medicine.
That is why they said, "if they discover the medicine, they will take it to another world.
They will transform it and they will give you orders about how to do the work".

And this is what we are experiencing. Many who do the work well are viewed badly, as *brujos*. Others say that it is a drug. There is no respect. That respect has been lost.

The problem with the white man is that as soon as he learns something, straight away he wants to be more than the person who taught him. He comes with that humility, that innocence, of wanting to learn, support and collaborate. But I have not seen a single foreigner, up until today, who has 20 years of preparation. Three or four years would be a lot, and maximum, they might have 10 years of preparation. And then they leave. They go. And it is like they don't know you anymore. And if they invite you, they are in charge. And that makes me really sad and angry. And you realise that they have taken your place. They have taken your work away from you. But not your knowledge, not that.

The sadness comes when you see them managing things incorrectly. You see that they are managing things in a way that they should not. They steal, to a certain extent, and then they don't use it well. And you are left thinking, "I opened my doors for this?" You want to help a person and then they pay you by betraying you. First, they were humble, then they obtained things and now they think they don't need you any longer. They wanted to learn in the right way, but then their ego got bigger. And their friends and family also say to them, "you can do it on your own, why are you

staying there?" And instead of carrying on, they get stuck there, because they have betrayed you[145].

"Despite all the words, sciences or religions, we are ignorant. And that ignorance is what stops us from looking after our home which is the earth"

The other message from my grandfather was that, in the future, we were going to be persecuted through the justice system. And that there would be a lot of chaos in the world. The chaos that is being created does not just affect humans but also the planet. Human beings and the planet are being exterminated. And the planet is so beautiful! Despite all the words, sciences and religions, we are ignorant. And that ignorance is what stops us from looking after our home, which is the earth. But the majority of people no longer want to live "naturally". Perhaps in some community, some village, where they live in their own world, without knowing much about what is happening outside, maybe still having their ecological pharmacy and their natural supermarket right there. Maybe doing exchanges so they have clothes, but with two items of clothing they have enough for two years.

[145] José:"To date, of the 16 gringos that I have seen doing *dieta* when I was also doing *dieta*, 7 have died and 8 are ill. Of the 8 *mestizo* people that I have seen learn: 7 are super-*brujos* and 1 is dead. I call them "brujos" because they do bad things to people. Many people come to them with a lot of money to do bad things to other people: separations, bindings, bindings as revenge, other things for revenge, due to jealousy. It is a way of having a person killed without having to use a hired killer or risk the legal consequences".

"That natural life, that freedom"

What I see in many parts of Europe is that the places seem lovely, but they are not alive. People are closed in. There are no children bathing in the rivers. There is a lot of pollution. There is no, what I would call, natural life. There is no freedom. In the Amazon, there are boas, there are things like that, but nevertheless people bathe, even so the children jump into the water. In Europe people are really gripped by fear[146]. A culture of risk. People are really restricted. Controlled. What has happened with Covid has also shown that. And the new wars for water which will come... Without food we can withstand it for a little while, but not without water and air. I don't know how it is going to change. Maybe Europe will be Iquitos, and the new inhabitants will be parrots. Because who knows how things will turn out when there are such great changes.

I believed for a long time (until some 6 years ago) that the technological superiority of this "developed" civilisation which came to invade us was due to their work, due to their intelligence. But I realise now that it is a lot of theft, war, deception, lies, rape and forcing people. They dominate us by making us believe that they are more intelligent and that they work better. That is how they dominate us and make us work for them.

[146] Translators' note: A literal translation of the Spanish version would be "in Europe people have fear really stuck to them" (*en Europa la gente tiene el miedo muy pegado*). This is an uncommon image. It describes people having fear very close to them. We could say that it is about people not having much distance from fear, or not being able to treat fear with enough distance. We chose to use an expression that would be more familiar to a reader in English, even though the lack of distance becomes a grip and fear becomes the agent.

"Because the big trees keep the younger ones firm in the ground"

Let's turn to another important point: in the communities in the Amazon, around Iquitos, for example, there is oil, around Pucallpa there is gas, around Puerto Maldonado there is gold and in all three areas there is wood. We knew that those things were there. Above all, the *meraya* and the *onanya* who would go off for months to walk around there, because they were the researchers of the plants and the lands. They went with their bow and arrow, with their machete, their little cooking pan and their matches. They knew and they told us that there were a lot of riches back there. We kept to our belief that these things have a mother and that, if you take them out, it will harm us. All the wood that we did *dieta* with was sacred. Another type of wood was used to build a house. Out of respect the trees were not cut down just like that. Because the big trees keep the younger ones firm in the ground. But others have come without this respect, and they have cut them down, without thinking about the future.

"I see, in so many parts of the world, that they are not interested in whether a tree has a mother, just as they are not interested in how it feels to disrespect"

When we started to study, we already knew the value of gold, because they had killed the Incas. But because we had respect, we wouldn't exploit it. I see, in many parts of the world, that they are not interested in whether a tree has a mother, just as they are not interested in how it feels to disrespect.

One time I took my mother's pipe when I had to go on a trip to work in Pisco and I didn't have a pipe, and she was sick. And I didn't tell her that I had taken her pipe. For her it was a terrible loss. They had stolen all her riches. Her grandfather had given her that pipe, which had been passed down by her great-aunt. Her pipe was 50 years old. It was made of *pona*, which is a wood that can no longer be found because it has all been cut down by loggers. And in part we could say, "but what value does that have if it is made of wood, I could make one just the same". But it is like going and taking everything from a people.

When the trees, the stones, the chants, the objects of other peoples are taken away, that has an *ucha*, the energy of a great error. The error of having taken years of knowledge from other peoples. So, if the white people had left all the things that sustain us all, with our ways of life, the world would not be the way it is now, with that *ucha* that is dark and that darkens the world. Or if they had at least asked for permission to take it and had planted more nearby. Asking for permission with respect to take a little and at the same time to think about how to compensate for it. But when it is taken without that respect and without compensation, with that violence, with that power, then it actually turns into our punishment... or do they by chance not have grandchildren?

"Do not do things without respect because everything has its mother. Because we are not alone in this world"

Here in our culture, we want to live well in our old age, without difficulties, without suffering. We want to die in peace. To have our body rest in peace. And to have that freedom of entering

another world without suffering. All those who have committed great errors in the past and have not cleaned themselves, are not going to rest in peace and are not at peace now. Each of their deaths has been difficult. And that is the advice of the elders. They would say, "don't do things without respect because everything has its mother: the river has his mother, the forest has his mother the mountain has his mother, the land has her mother. Because we are not alone in this world. And the loveliest thing is to be able to rest quietly and for our soul or spirit to go to a peaceful space, where they receive us with a warm welcome. If you kill, rob, deceive, lie and then you go … do you think that you will be welcomed again into the community? If you have done bad things, do you think they will open the doors to your child in the future? The first thing they will look at is who your father and mother were. And if you have done bad things, your child will go and join those who respect you for your bad actions. But if your child goes through life with the goodness that you have done, then those who value goodness will open their doors to them. That is to say, live without harming anyone. Don't do what others do because they want money. If you confront them, you will not be able to win, but don't do what they do".

"If you confront them,
you will not be able to win,
but don´t do what they do"

Nowadays, Indigenous people have already become open to taking gold and wood. But there is no longer any … and if they find some, they take it. That is how they keep killing us, but in a different way. My grandmother used to say to my grandfather, "hurry up, bring wood". And my grandfather would answer her, "I am working", because he had taken his ayahuasca. And my grandmother would say, "I am telling you to hurry up, go and cultivate the land. How can you be working if you are lying in your

hammock?" That is how ways of thinking and reacting are transformed.

It is ayahuasca that is producing business in our Shipibo world. Everyone is growing ayahuasca; everyone is harvesting ayahuasca and nobody is planting it again. And the price keeps increasing. It is being cut down younger and younger. Even five year-old ayahuasca is now being cut down. The new gold. Brown gold. Just as coca is green gold.

EPILOGUE

DIETA AS METHODOLOGY

Emilia Sanabria

OPENING

The book you are holding in your hands is the result of a beautiful, challenging and deeply transformative creation process for those of us who were lucky to participate in its dreaming, genesis, realisation and birth into the world. Having had the opportunity to accompany this process, to witness the deeply caring intent and alignment with which it was realized, I am excited to see how its message travels, to observe its reception and the understandings that it opens as it touches the people who read it. As a close observer of the so-called Psychedelic Renaissance and the rising interest, globally, in the power of plant medicines, there is no doubt for me that perspectives such as José's need to be at the forefront of the movement. Such perspectives provide a much-needed basis from which to rethink what we think we know about science and healing. Below, I outline three specific contributions I see José's perspective making to the booming field of psychedelic-assisted therapies.

In the face of the appropriation of sellable fragments of Shipibo culture there are a range of responses. Jose Lopes Sanchez's, as transpires in this dialogue, is a deep plant-informed study of the ways of the colonizer and his maladies, and a hopeful and pedagogical orientation to the future. He offers a masterclass for coming into caring encounter, for encounters that are dynamic, alive and regenerative rather than congealed by colonial orderings. With didactic care he patiently returns point by point to the labour of reframing the dissociated, fragmented understanding of efficacy and agency that he has learnt to diagnose in Western minds.

José, as Silvia Mesturini writes in the Introduction, does not present Shipibo culture as a unified whole, nor does he pitch himself as a spokesperson for this culture. He speaks instead from his experience

as someone born into Shipibo lineages, and informed by his labour, the work he has devoted his life to and the webs of human and more-than-human relations that he cultivates.

SITUATING

This book is the outcome of many layered encounters. It was made possible by generous funding from the European Research Council as part of a research project titled Healing Encounters: reinventing an indigenous medicine in the clinic and beyond that I designed and directed between 2018 and 2024. Silvia was a member of this team between 2019 and 2023, working in the sub-project "Healing in the Forest" to which she brought her longstanding research experience in Peruvian ayahuasca circles. Within the frame provided by the project we were able to give Silvia and José's longstanding collaboration a new dimension, inviting José to take on the role of scientific and ethical advisor to the project and transferring financial resources to ShipiboRao as a means of recognizing his labour as a researcher in his own right and as a co-laborator in our wider collective endeavour. As we strove to open up a space for this dialogue within the academy, with its legacy of extractive research bolstered by tacitly racist administrative categories, Silvia and I came to define the collaboration we were designing with ShipiboRao as it pertained to the wider container of the project HealingEncoutners within the frame of Indigenous research methods.[1]

One of our core intentions was to disrupt the disciplinary and academic mechanisms that render knowledge such as José's the object of ours. The intention in this sense is not the "scientific validation" of his knowledge, for science is far too limited to grasp the breadth of what José shares. Rather we sought to recognize his way of knowing as an exquisitely complex mode of knowing that is on a par with, and in some regards far superior to, scientific inquiry.

When José, invited by Silvia, agreed to join the HealingEncounters project, he expressed the desire to make a book as part of this collaborative endeavour. As we strove to mediate between the multiple and oftentimes contradictory logics of anthropology as a discipline (marked by contradictions between a deep respect for alterity and a legacy of colonial othering) the project logics, with its opportunities, resources and legal and administrative constraints, as well as the complex logics of an institution such as ShipiboRao operating between Indigenous worlds and the extractive logics of shamanic tourism, we moved slowly, with care, respect, and a meticulous attention to translating between the ethics of the forest, and those given by the framework of the project. The Covid pandemic provided a frustrating but perhaps salutary interruption and downscaling of the initial ambitions that enabled this process to emerge in its own timeframe. There was nothing else to do but trust in the rightness of the process, exactly as it was taking shape.

HealingEncounters, as a collaborative research project, was organised around ethnographic work in three 'sites': Forest (where we worked with ShipiboRao and with the Huni Kuin artist collective MAHKU in, Acre, Brazil), City (which examined the reinvention of ritual formations in urban settings) and Lab (which tracked the development of the so-called psychedelic renaissance and the place of ayahuasca within this). The themes and questions that we were exploring in this research collective (composed of five researchers: Silvia Mesturini, Piera Talin, Pietro Benedito, Isabel de Rose and myself) were deeply shaped by the work we were able to carry out with José. Thinking with and through his perspective was important for everything else that was going on in the project. Conversely, the frame that the collective provided, the questions and orientations generated in the wider project, informed some of the questions we then brought to the recording process that this book arose from. Beyond this concrete manifestation of the book then, the process of its coming into being afforded opportunities for co-polinisation that will hopefully be as precious to José and ShipiboRao as it has been to HealingEncounters. For this opportunity, I have immense gratitude to both Silvia and to José. El proyecto colaborativo de investigación *Encuentros de Sanación* se

organiza alrededor del trabajo etnográfico en tres «espacios»: la "selva", donde trabajamos de manera conjunta con José y con el colectivo de artistas Huni Kuin *MAHKU*, de Acre, Brasil; la "ciudad" donde se estudia la reinvención de formaciones rituales en entornos urbanos, el "laboratorio", donde se analiza el desarrollo del llamado renacimiento psicodélico y el lugar que ocupa la ayahuasca en él. El trabajo que llevamos a cabo con José moldeó profundamente los temas y las cuestsu manifestación concreta, ofreciendo oportunidades para una polinización mutua que ojalá sea tan valiosa para José y para *Shipibo Rao* como lo ha sido para *Encuentros de Sanación*. Agradezco profundamente a Silvia y a José por esta oportunidad.

EXPERIMENTING

As Silvia outlined in the Introduction, Dieta was adopted as the methodology ShipiboRao and HealingEncounters shared. Within the framework of the Dieta we shared, the experimental nature of the process was particularly salient, not just for Silvia and I, but also for José and the other participants present, as we came to realise. This had never been done before, not in this way. And there was, as we left Pucallpa and drove to ShipiboRao, a question hanging over us all as to whether what had been dreamt would even be possible. The possibility of needing to recognize that the process was not working and changing everything, in response to what the plants might show, was on the table. Not an easy thing to surrender to, after the 18-month long Covid interruption. But this possibility emerged as a necessary way of acknowledging the imperative of non-mastery.[11]

José explained to us that we were taking a risk: we were going to be doing work which was *muy* mental (thought-based) in the Dieta space which is a space he understands as requiring trust and observation, not thinking. I understood this to mean we would be walking a very fine line and that there might be consequences. But as José said, in conversations as we were leaving Pucallpa, it is precisely in situations of risk-taking that "new things" can arise. That said, he was asking (and warning) us to proceed with upmost

caution, a message that Silvia and I took with absolute seriousness. This conversation alerted us to something we had not fully grasped until then, which was how experimental this was for José as well. It had been obvious to us that we were in new methodological terrain, but something about realizing this was a shared methodological grey zone for us all was important in setting the tone for the ensuing dialogue. Together, we would be attentive to this. The responsibility to care for the method was put into the collective space in a way that shifted something very deep for me, as a researcher.

And so the process of arriving and slowly sinking more deeply into the vegetalized experience of Dieta began. We had been in extensive dietary restriction for the week prior, and upon arriving in ShipiboRao were given purgative plants to cleanse our systems before beginning. Our diet in ShipiboRao was almost exclusively plant-based, all medications and habitual health-making strategies were interrupted[III] in order to open the way for a clearer relationship with the plant that we would be "dieting." Each one of us would be dieting a different plant. Each day, we drank a decoction of this plant that we had gone into the forest together to harvest. Shampoo and soap were proscribed, as were perfumes (with the exception of *agua florida*), cultivating a uniquely multispecific olfactory field carefully mediated by daily herbal and steam baths that gave me new insight into the importance of the sense of smell in Indigenous Amazonia.

In addition to these radical changes in our quotidian embodied practices, we were invited to dry fast from 6pm to noon the next day. Dry fasting was presented as the reciprocal gift we could offer the plant we were dieting in exchange for its medicine and teachings. It shows the plant your commitment and it sharpens the intention, José explained. Within this frame, marked by the accentuated somatic experiences of thirst, hunger, heightened clarity, sweating, day dreaming, listening to the gentle hum of the forest, washing laundry, gathering thoughts, resting, focusing, we would gather daily with José in a tambo dedicated to this work to exchange and record. Slowly, day after day, our conversations with

José deepened as we vegetalized. The questions that we had prepared ahead of time were reformulated as the process unfolded, and Silvia and I would meet each day before the recording sessions to review new questions that had emerged and revise the residual questions from the previous days. Some themes naturally dropped away and others emerged with clarity in the space of the unfolding phytotropic dialogue that took form, day after day.

In this sense, the collaboration that made this book possible was forged through the strength of the commitment to the Dieta that we shared, as we sought new forms of dialogue and encounter. It is impossible to fully acknowledge with words all that was shared. The painstaking labour that Silvia conducted over months after this time together in ShipiboRao, sitting with the material and methodologically distilling, like an Alchemist, the spoken words, full of José's aire, carefully finding a way to give written form to the flow of his spoken words, to land them on the page. This meticulous labour was possible thanks to the temporal resonances built up over years of exchanges between Silvia and José (and his family).

How to assemble the story on the page in a way that conveys to a reader the depth of what is shared, what is expressed? For the gap between spoken words and words on the page can be abysmal and it takes care to begin to bridge it. This was a big concern for José from the outset. He had experimented before with modes of capturing the flow of insight that came after ceremony. But, as he shared before we began, it had totally failed. Things had not translated. He knew what was at stake in this translation and was unsure it was even possible. I remember sharing that we should begin by recognizing that it was necessarily going to be impossible to fully capture the depth of what was available in those moments of insight. But that, nevertheless, we could respectfully, humbly, try to capture something together and then commit to carefully reviewing it and attending to its lively intent through ongoing check ins to ensure that the process of translating from the phyto-dialogue to the book stayed true to José's intent at every step. The displacement that was invited was of a continuous dialogue in

time, that stops momentarily with the crystalized form that is this book, but that will endure and continue its lively trajectory in the world through the myriad ways it touches you, the reader.

Sitting with the final manuscript and reaching back in time to connect with the profoundly transformative experience of the Dieta, three key aspects of José's transmission emerged for me. These are three gifts that I take away from his teachings that I feel are of tremendous relevance for the current moment of ayahuasca's global expansion and the boom in interest in "psychedelics."

AYAHUASCA IS *NOT* PSYCHEDELIC

"Psychedelic" is the term widely adopted to refer to "substances" that are "mind manifesting." José insists at length on the fact that ayahuasca is not a substance, despite being classified as such by biomedical and legal regimes. Although we did not explicitly engage in a discussion about the category "psychedelic" with José during our recorded exchanges, his positions on the deceptiveness of the *mente* (mind) were a through-line that merits close attention for the publics interested in the value of so-called psychedelics.[IV]

Much of the biomedical treatment given to ayahuasca is framed within the fields of neuropharmacology or cognitive science.[V] Much anthropological work on ayahuasca reproduces this cognitive impetus with its focus on the visual or visionary[VI], on "hallucinations"[VII] or on cognition, language, information and thought.[VIII] My research has always centered embodiment, the somatic and the experiential[IX] which is perhaps the reason for which from the outset, I was cautious with these cognitive approaches and proposed, in HealingEncounters, to focus on the "mind below the neck."[X] While there is certainly much to learn about the cognitive and neurogenerative pathways that ayahuasca opens up, the emphasis of so many of my interlocutors who work therapeutically with these medicines is to approach the mind's tricks and the illusionary world of the visions that these medicines can generate with caution. This, as José explains at length here, is challenging for many Westerners.

This perspective runs throughout the book and was clearly re-iterated by the Maestros to the Dieta participants: "Don't think too much, trust," they emphasised. In this sense, the mind is often pitched as an obstacle to transformation. For this reason, Dietas are moments in which the mind should be calmed, and not activated by reading, over-thinking, analyzing, talking, human interaction and conversation. In a real Dieta, José told us there is "nada mental" (nothing mental), one should be very bored. And this was precisely, for the collective that we formed in this experimental Dieta space the challenge: for we would be doing a form of mental work, and it was possible that the plants would respond, or that the consequences (through ulterior pruebas) would be shown. So even as we engaged in conversations daily, recording and formulating questions, we were acutely aware of this line we were walking and constantly engaged in a practice of disengaging from a certain form of intellectualisation and analysis in favour of an orientation towards encounter, listening, and receiving. As José puts it (p.204): *"the gringo studies a lot, reads a lot, knows and researches thousands of things, however, that is why they come here with a very mental mindset and they think that when they come and take ayahuasca, they are going to do the work".*

If we listen to José carefully, we might in fact reframe my earlier statement: ayahuasca can be mind manifesting (if that is what is cultivated) but this is not a desirable or helpful thing, in his view. José made a clear connection between this mentalist approach and the fascination Western participants often have with "visions". These, he notes, are often taken too literally, as a sign that the plants are "speaking" to them. Yet these things that gringos often report the plants have told them are not actually the plants speaking at all:

> *("…that is not what the plants are. This is a mental process. It is their own story. They themselves create these things but they don't know where they come from. They themselves hallucinate and they believe their hallucinations because they have taken ayahuasca without reviewing their personal and ancestral traumas. That is to say, it is their mind which is in charge. And in a ceremony, there are a thousand pieces*

> *of information, but to work with gringos you have to be very precise. I take great care when telling them things or when sharing what I see because their mind can easily go crazy. Power, both mental and through words, is very significant for them. And it is difficult for them to stay in the experience, in the process of the pruebas" (p.230)*

The danger of excessively cognitive approaches to ayahuasca is – as José powerfully notes: "el aprendizaje ya es mental, *no está conectado al corazón*" (p.186). This provides a vital corrective, I believe, to the very colonial concern with knowledge rendered almost exclusively as something in the brain, and in an almost irrationally rationalist manner that can be entirely separated from the relational, heart-centred ethics that characterize the way José invites us to see this transformative system of healing and being-in-the-world.[xi]

INTEGRATION IS NOT OPTIONAL, IT IS THE WORK.

Within the movement known as "psychedelic-assisted therapy" a wide range of divergent practices and strategies for managing non-ordinary experiences such as those afforded by plant teachers like ayahuasca or psilocybin have more or less coalesced around a standardised model. This can schematically be summarised as: preparation for the session (which may include diagnostic psychometric tests, identifying areas to explore and building the therapeutic alliance), carefully held or supervised "dosing" sessions followed by "integration". This is what, to over-summarise a complex debate, distinguishes recreational from therapeutic use (to stay with Western categories). Integration is widely understood to be essential and yet its contours, its ethos, its form and its content are elusive. Within transpersonal psychology, integration tends to be understood as the work of assimilating the insights of non-ordinary experiences (such as psychedelic experiences) into the person's daily life, bringing about durable changes in habits, thought-processes or outlooks. Without this

work, the experience remains exceptional and its therapeutic or transformative potential is lost.[xii]

The elaboration José provides on *dietas* and *pruebas* adds something key to this discussion that is often missed in the increasingly self-making, coaching-inflected discourses of integration service provision. What the notion of integration lacks is the relational ethos that José describes in his account of the *pruebas* of the post-*dieta* (particularly).

Noting that Gringos often yearn for transcendental visionary experiences, investing in these the greatest transformative potential, José imparts that the deepest insights often come in small day-to-day moments, on mundane topics. Meeting the 'tests' (*pruebas*) that come in the post-Dieta is the real work. Tending to the post-*Dieta* and navigating its tests is one of the most beautiful renderings of the wisdom that psychedelic theories of integration try to approximate. It adds a relational, ethical and (for want of a better term) contractual dimension to the work.

> It is important to understand that after leaving here, that is when the patient's work comes; that part is their responsibility. They are no longer in Shipibo Rao, there is no longer a maestro every day blowing soplo on their head. That is where their work lies: how to maintain it, how to keep it going. They can run around, shout, cry, whatever, but they can't get angry, they can't cross the dieta. And that part of the work mustn't be done for us, the maestros, even though we also suffer if they cross the dieta. That work has to be done for the plants. And this question is the most difficult for the gringo to understand. *(p.204)*

This reciprocal framework that extends well beyond the ritual time, expressed through one's "respect" and "patience" as José does not tire in explaining, is what makes durable transformation possible. The gardening metaphor that José draws on extensively presents the work of Dieta as removing, from the root, ill-ness which makes the clearing of a physical space in the patient's body possible, in

order to then sow a new seed, water it (tears are particularly helpful at this stage), tend to it, continue to clear the ground around the new seedling so it may grow strong, until the *dietero* is ready to leave and sustain this new plant alone. This is when the post-*dieta* – a particularly sophisticated form of integration – sets in. And the horizon this approach offers is:

> *And when the post-dieta ends, that does not mean that you can do what you want. You have to keep maintaining that seed until it grows, until flowers bloom, the roots go deeper, the trunk gets thicker. Once that has been well maintained, things can happen to you, but you don't fall down, and you see a difference in your own actions. You learn to distinguish types of energies. You feel that when someone speaks unkindly to you, it no longer matters to you. If before when you heard some gossip you would start to cry, it no longer matters to you. If before you were easy to anger, not so much now. And you see these changes. (p.258)*

RADICAL INTERRELATIONSHIP

The account of the process of knowing and healing with plants goes so far beyond the reductionist, Eurocentric framework of "set and setting" that it reveals the poverty of this notion – even as we may recognise the advance it enabled within biomedical understandings. For in repeatedly re-emphasizing the synergistic interplay of drug and setting, is biomedicine not in the end just continuing to highlight and reinforce the distinction – as it strives to overcome it?

It is in apparently simple turns of phrases – such as when José asks: "what do curanderos dedicate themselves to? Not only to giving ayahuasca" – that we can grasp his efforts to continually refuse the Western conceptual separation and extraction of these plants, the Icaro, the forest, the ethical relations from each other. Recognizing the interplay of set and setting with substance or the importance of the "therapeutic alliance" between patient and practitioner – whilst important steps – pales in comparison to the

deep study of radical interrelationship that Indigenous science excels at.

During an unrecorded conversation that took place in ShipiboRao, José was asked by a "patient" if he can see his patients' trauma. He responded that it was his job to feel it, to sing to it, and to learn to feel the difference between what is his and what is the other person's sorrow. He ended simply by saying "this is hard work, I must feel it." And this work is not limited – for curanderos – to the timespace of the ceremonial work. It endures long after. The radical interrelationship I am trying to name here is manifest in the fact that if a patient crosses their Dieta, José himself becomes ill. What happens to those he cares for, their choices and challenges, directly impact his own being. He chooses to hold his work in this level of responsibility to the other he supports. This is the depth of the encounter.

In this sense, this book can be read and re-read as a detailed account of what Silvia beautifully captured with the term "entangled ayahuasca,"[xiii] an ayahuasca that is fully enlaced and vitally entangled in memory, territory, ecology. It is in this sense that José's warning takes its full meaning: as ayahuasca is extracted and captured by capitalist logics and magic bullet regimes it will cease to be what it is: (entangled) ayahuasca and become what has already begun to take place: ayahuascaïna.

José's objective is less to prevent what has already begun to take place: the ayahuascaïnization of ayahuasca. Rather, his goal is to celebrate, honour and protect the persistence of an otherwise (entangled) ayahuasca. And so we may continuously and collectively return to the question – as we encounter different forms of this medicine in the world – is this ayahuasca or ayahuascaïna? And how do we stand in relation to this?

ENDING

Preparing myself for and participating in this very unique plant Dieta was a turning point in my life and experience of plants.

It afforded a moment of deep joy in the experience of sharing something much larger than each of us. José's words echo in me and continue to nourish me deeply. The lessons I learnt here, the pruebas I experienced continue to dot my day to day with little reminders, winks, and aha moments that bring me back to the clarity that I found in ShipiboRao and that has profoundly shaped how I show up to the research questions I continue to tackle. I bring to them these echoes of José's vision, rigour, kindness and generosity.

May you, dear reader, trust in what reading this will awaken and stir in you. May it serve you well. May it be in right relationship to the labour of all those who partook in some way in the making possible of the vision that ShipiboRao holds. To the members of José's lineages, to those who tend to the land, and prepare the food and care for the seedlings that are planted in the beings of those who pass through its doors, to the plants, to the forest, to the waters, to the air, to the fires that cook the medicines and transmute the archives of suffering. With gratitude to all these beings and to José for his trust and this precious transmission.

Emilia Sanabria
April 2025, Paris, France
París, Francia

Notes

[I] Some of the references we drew inspiration from in this were: CLEAR, 2021. Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research Lab Book: A Living Manual of Our Values, Guidelines, and Protocols V.03. St. John's, NewfoundLand: Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, 2012. Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. 2nd Edition. London: Zed Books Ltd. TallBear, Kim, 2014. Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry. Journal of Research Practice 10(2): Article n°17 Wilson, Shawn, 2008. Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods. Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing Company Limited.

[II] I came to the Dieta process in a moment in which I was reflecting deeply on the question of human mastery, informed by the following work: Akomolafe, Bayo, 2021. Let's Meet at the Crossroads. Commencement Keynote Address to Pacifica Graduate Institute Pacifica, CA. https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/lets-meet-at-the-crossroads. Singh, Julietta, 2018. Unthinking

Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. Taussig, Michael, 2020. Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

[III] In this I realised that I had numerous allied plants in my day-to-day - which was a lovely realisation.

[IV] It is worth noting that a number of speakers at the Indigenous Ayahuasca Conference held in Brazilian Amazonia in Sept 2022 explicitly repudiated the category 'psychedelic' in their addresses.

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[VI] For example : Luna, Luis Eduardo, and Pablo Amaringo. 1999. Ayahuasca visions: the religious iconography of a Peruvian shaman. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic ; or Gearin, Alex & O. Calavia Sáez 2021. Altered vision: Ayahuasca shamanism and sensory individualism. *Current Anthropology* 62, 138-63

[VII] Dupuis D. The socialization of hallucinations: Cultural priors, social interactions, and contextual factors in the use of psychedelics. *Transcultural Psychiatry*. 2022;59(5):625-637. Doi:10.1177/13634615211036388

[VIII] Kohn, E. 2022. Forest Forms and Ethical Life. *Environmental Humanities*.14 (2): 401–418. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-9712478

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[IX] In particular in Sanabria, E. 2016. *Plastic Bodies*. Duke University Press

[X] Sanabria, E. 2019. Towards an anthropology of encounters: ayahuasca's multiplicity and the politics of knowledge. Habilitation à diriger des recherches. Ecole normale supérieure de Lyon, France, Chapter 1.

[XI] See also Sanabria, Emilia. "020. "(Psychedelics) Beyond the "Neuro"." Hot Spots, *Fieldsights*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/psychedelics-beyond-the-neuro for how this might apply outside Amazonian contexts.

[XII] For a detailed genealogical analysis of integration see Sanabria, E., & Tófoli, L. F. (2025). Integration or commodification? A critical review of individual-centered approaches in psychedelic healing. *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* (published online ahead of print 2025). https://doi.org/10.1556/2054.2024.00411

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Glossary of terms for the english edition

Translators' Glossary

This glossary aims to describe the challenges inherent in translating José's words into English and to provide some clarity on why certain translations were chosen. Firstly, it seems important to us to address the fact that this book has been translated, with José's knowledge and consent, by two non-indigenous European women. One who has spent many years in a deep friendship and professional research relationship with José. The other who has worked in a national indigenous organisation in Latin America, translating/interpreting from Spanish into English during human rights encounters with the international community, including with indigenous nations from the global north. We recognize the power imbalances inherent in translating José's words into English, a contemporary dominant language. We have therefore taken great care to recognize and pay respect to the responsibility given to us by José, by working through multiple drafts of the book in English, with the aim of transmitting the meaning of his words as faithfully as possible. The examples we give below show how we have aimed to capture the unique ways that José expresses meaning. We hope that by translating this book into English, according to his own wishes, José's words can reach a wider audience. At the heart of this translation, therefore, is the desire to actively work against the silencing of indigenous voices and the appropriation of their practices.

The difficulty of translation is also one of the themes that traverses the whole book in José's dialogues. José lives in a bilingual Shipibo society which has been confronted with acculturation since the first catholic missions of the XVI century and whose Shipibo language has partly become a written language in the last century under the influence of the colonial and extractivist evangelical mission "*Instituto Lingüístico de Verano*" which created the first Shipibo-Spanish dictionary and grammar. Still commonly used today even though the national education has created bilingual public schools within the communities, this process has in many ways altered the

meaning and use of Shipibo language. José speaks of his difficulty in translating how the elders used to speak into contemporary Shipibo. He says, "the elders spoke with other meanings". Nevertheless, it has become common for José to speak of his work and knowledge in Spanish, knowing that this implies further translation and therefore further transformation. The Spanish word "*dieta*" is the common translation of the Shipibo practice of "*sama*". José calls the medicinal chants "*icaros*" even when he speaks Shipibo. Some Spanish ways of speaking about his practice have become as habitual as Shipibo expressions to him. At times, even more habitual than some Shipibo ones. Nevertheless, translating his way of expressing his work and knowledge in English is a very different endeavour, much further away from a translation he understands and uses.

Many of the words that we wish to highlight in this glossary simultaneously describe concepts, actions and images in the original Spanish. Most of them are used by José as verbs, nouns and adjectives and are associated with a particular way of doing things and of talking about them. Hopefully this glossary helps to better situate the multiple flavours and importance of these words. It is important to note that we have not translated any Shipibo words used by José into English. At times, in order to aid the fluid reading of the book, we have translated some Spanish terms into English, which we feel require further explanation in this glossary. At other times, we have chosen to leave terms in Spanish. The main examples of and reasons for these linguistic choices can be found below.

Unusual expressions or phrasing

We have tried to find a balance between avoiding both over-translation and under-translation. Some sentences might seem particularly enigmatic or somewhat different from ordinary ways of expressing. We have kept these ambiguities where they were also present in the original Spanish, as both an effort to respect José and for accuracy in what José intentionally leaves open-ended. At other times we have translated expressions to help the reader. The following are just some examples of this:

"And if they can't find, I can help them find"

The transitive verb "to find" requires an object, an "it". In English as well as in Spanish. Yet José leaves this open-ended because what needs to be found is not known in advance. Finding means finding out what needs to be found and, at the same time, finding « it ». Or rather, finding out what was needed to be found by finding it.

"A curandero can fall"

The capacity to heal can be lost, because healing is relational. It involves the capacities of other beings, namely those of the healing plants, not as chemical remedies but as people who collaborate with the *onanya* in order to induce a healing process. Therefore, a *curandero* falls when he makes a mistake, a relational mistake. When he betrays the plants' trust. And a fallen *curandero* is a *curandero* that has lost his capacity to heal. However, this loss might not be definitive. By doing *dieta*, the *curandero* might be able to reestablish trust and collaboration.

"If you don't receive, you wait"

As for the example with the verb "to find", the open-endedness of this way of speaking and of practicing is essential here. You don't know what you will receive. Nor when. But in order to receive, it is necessary to wait.

"In Europe, people are really gripped by fear"

A literal translation of the Spanish version would be "in Europe people have fear really stuck to them" (*en Europa la gente tiene el miedo muy pegado*). This is an uncommon image. It describes people having fear very close to them. We could say that it is about people not having much distance from fear, or not being able to treat fear with enough distance. We chose to use an expression that would be more familiar to a reader in English, even though the lack of distance becomes a grip and fear becomes the agent.

Gender of ayahuasca, plants and environmental elements

It is of major importance, as part of the knowledge that is held in this book, to understand that plants are addressed and are thought of as people. The use of the English "it" has therefore been avoided in order to

prevent an objectification of those who are "relational subjects" to the speaker. This concerns many plants as well as the decoction ayahuasca. As the neutral "it" option is absent in the Spanish language, the gender of this persona has been important to consider throughout. José most often refers to ayahuasca as feminine but sometimes as masculine. We have kept his references to ayahuasca as "her" or "him" according to the original Spanish version of the book. It is interesting to note, that when directly consulted, José said that he considers ayahuasca to be more masculine than feminine. This way of addressing plants as persona is extended to rivers, river pools, to the forest, to portions of land and to the Earth as a whole. We have respected this in the text by keeping and translating the gender used in Spanish.

Terms translated into English requiring further explanation

In some cases, we have chosen to translate certain terms into English that might be difficult for the reader to comprehend if left in Spanish. We also feel, however, that some further explanation will help the reader understand the complex ideas held by these words.

Align for "*alinear*/*alineado*"

Within the conversation in chapter 9, we discuss the difficulty of translating this word, which is used as both a noun and an adjective. Even though it entails the idea of a "line", this image doesn't seem to fit with what José intends to express. It is rather connected with the idea of things, thoughts, feelings, people and situations fitting well together. It is about being in a pattern of movement that is favourable. A *curandero* can chant in order to "*alinear*", to make things fit again, to entangle them properly, to have them flowing within a common movement. An opposite image to that of "alignment" is that of something being "crossed". A *dieta*, a chant (*ícaro*) can be well aligned. A person can be well aligned. A *dieta* can suddenly get "crossed" due to a lack of respect for the restrictions. See also "crossed *dieta*".

Clean for "*limpiar*"

This word is often translated as "cleanse", by José's English-speaking patients. However, we chose to translate "*limpiar*" with "to clean" in order

to stay closer to the simplicity and yet the strength of the verb "to clean". To clean in this type of practice works as a synonym of "to heal" and sometimes we have played with this synonymy while translating. Depending on the context, we also use the phrasal verbs "clean up" and "clear out". Healing means clearing things out but also finding out how far the "cleaning up" needs to go.

Elders for "*ancianos/as*" and "*abuelos/as*"

This word translates *abuelos* and *abuelas* as well as *ancianos* and *ancianas*. We have considered that José uses them quite synonymously and that elders hold both an idea of people from past generations and of grandparents. The exception to this is when José talks about his actual grandfather.

Fit in well for "encajar bonito"

"Fit in well" translates the expression "*encajar bonito*" which, despite the apparent ease of the image, is very important for evaluating the efficiency of a treatment. When a person starts doing better, things will start "fitting in well", 'things will fit in nicely". It is often related to the image of "*alinear*" (verb) or "*alineado*"(adjective) also present in this glossary.

Flower Bath/flower water

This is our translation for what in Spanish are called "*baños de flores*" and "*agua florida*". Flower baths can be both hot and cold. They imply a preparation of water with either boiled plants or macerated plants. When they are hot, they are a form of individual steam bath. When they are cold, the cold mixture is poured individually over the whole body and then left to dry slowly. They are prepared and given by the *onanya*. Chanting medicinal songs can be part of the practice. Flower water is used by *onanya* during their healing practice and during ceremonies with international patients. Flower water can be home-prepared by macerating plants in alcohol, however there is an industrially produced version (Murray & Lanman) which is also used frequently and is recognised as being effective by many Shipibo *onanya*.

Medicine for "*medicina*"

We have chosen to translate this word into English. However, it is important to note that the term "*medicina*" can sometimes be used to talk about ayahuasca, and sometimes it can also be kind of a synonym for the capacity, the experience, the *dietas* an *onanya* carries. The Spanish term also refers to a generic capacity to heal. Whichever meaning it has, it should be noted that the meaning is different from the common use of the term "medicine" in a modern, biomedical, sense.

Mothers of plants

"*Plantas que tienen madres*", plants who have mothers, as the title of the book indicates, is a central and yet difficult to translate concept related to plants and to ways of being in the world. Referring to "mothers" of plants is a translation from the Shipibo word, *ibo*. *Ibo* are also sometimes translated as "owners" or "guardians". Plants and other beings can have "*ibo*". The possibility and modalities of plants and others "having a mother" is also discussed in the general introduction to this book and in the introduction to chapter 1. For further reading (in French) on mothers of plants and their translations, see also the recent article by José Lopez Sanchez and Silvia Mesturini Cappo: https://drogues-sante-societe.ca/ayahuasca-sans-ayahuasca-du-clientelisme-chamanique-a-une-patientele-en-devenir/

Shock for "*chocar*"

We have chosen the verb "to shock" to translate the verb "*chocar*". This term appears often in the book. It is an important image used to indicate how something or someone — which can be a place, an object, a situation, a human and non-human being — interferes negatively with a given person. It is an image of collision but also of situated incompatibility. It entails a shock, a disruption or a sudden impossibility to interact or to continue one's healing practice.

Terms we have left in Spanish or Shipibo

For some important words that function as specific concepts and actions for the *onanya*, we have chosen to keep the Spanish version.

Arcana

Arcana is the main subject of the conversations in chapter 9, but it also appears earlier in the book. It is a "protection", it is a "chant", and it is made to be invisible, or "hidden". It is a protection and is "put" into a person by chanting. It is a verb (*arcanear*), an adjective (*arcaneado/a*) and a noun (*arcana*). Somebody who is "*arcaneado/a*" or that "has an *arcana*" has therefore received one through chanting. It is made by the *onanya* but it is part of their healing work in which *onanya* and *plants* are inextricable.

Ayahuasquero/a

Somebody who knows how to work with ayahuasca, within either the Indigenous or the mestizo context of the Amazon region. Sometimes used as synonym for "*maestro/a*", "*curandero/a*" and for the Shipibo terms "*Onanya/Meraya/Yobe*".

Brujo/bruja/brujería

As the words "*brujo*" and "*brujería*" are already Spanish translations and are highly charged with colonial meaning, we have chosen not to translate them into "witch" and "witchcraft", or "sorcerer" and "sorcery" in English, which would entail a further layer of semantic and historical differences that we do not wish to amalgamate. Targeted as "*brujos*" within colonial society and still today by the various Christian churches in the region, the term "*brujo*" condenses the mirrors and paradoxes of colonization, evangelization and acculturation. It has become common to use the term "*brujo*" to refer to "plant specialist", "healers", "traditional medicine practitioners" who are known to do harm, or who agree to do harm for their clients. This term oscillates between local Shipibo ways of using it and a more general category that disqualifies traditional practitioners altogether.

Bulto

This is the main subject of conversation in chapter 4, but already appears in chapter 3. The *bulto* is mainly an etiological term, used by José to diagnose his international patients. The term could be literally translated as "bundle", a kind of a lump, a protrusion, something that sticks to the person,

something a person carries. It holds a very interesting association with the idea of *brujería*, of a person being the object or the carrier of a "*brujería*", *shitana* in Shipibo. José explains in chapter 4, that the *bulto* "functions" in the same way as *brujería*: they both appear in the same way when looked at within the vision of the plants and the *icaros*. Yet the specificity of the *bulto*, Jose explains, is that it is often related to family lineage. He uses the term "trauma" and "ancestral trauma" in order to speak about and treat the *bultos* of his foreign patients. Further discussion of the *bulto* can be found in the introduction of chapter 4.

Curandero/a

Although this term is often translated as "healer", we have chosen not to translate it, as it is already a translation of the Shipibo terms *onanya or yobe*, which are much wider in meaning. Translating the complexity of the Indigenous plant experts' know-how into exclusively "medical" or "healing" terms is already problematic. Furthermore, the term *curandero* is a colonial term that carries colonial context and history. It carries the problematic translation of Indigenous authority figures into colonial language as well as into a political context of devaluation and silencing of Indigenous knowledge and ways of life. The Spanish term "*curandero*" refers to an "unofficial healer", even a "charlatan", as opposed to "doctors", officially designated by imported institutions (academies of medicine and medical associations defining the "legal" exercise of medicinal practice). These institutions sought and obtained unprecedented widespread legitimacy both in Europe and the Americas during the colonial period. Nevertheless, the term "*curandero/a*" is used today by Indigenous *onanya* to define themselves. Keeping it in Spanish when used by José meant for us staying with the complexity of this colonial background without "translating it away" through the English term "healer".

Dieta/Crossed dieta

We have chosen not to translate the word *dieta* in this book, as the English word "diet" in English feels too reductionist to encapsulate this practice. As in the case of *icaros*, discussions on understanding the practice of *dieta* run throughout the book. In local Spanish, the word translates the Shipibo practice *sama*. It is the main practice for learning and, especially in

contemporary configurations, also for healing. A "crossed *dieta*" occurs when a person does not follow restrictions given during the healing process, with consequences for both the patient and *onanya*. During *dietas*, the "dieted" plants can be vines, bushes or trees. Tree *dietas* are considered to be the hardest but also permit a deeper level of knowledge. It is interesting to note that in the Shipibo language there is no generic word for "plants". What we call "plants" are instead generalised in the following three words: *nishi* (vine), *jiwi* (tree or "*palo*" in local Spanish) and *shobi* (herb or bush).

Gringo/a

The term *gringo/a* functions as an opposite and complementary category to "Indigenous". It is mostly used in the book not to refer to actual people but as a way of qualifying forms of being, behaving, thinking, doing and talking that seem to José particularly different from what he considers "traditional" or "non-foreign" within his own environment or way of behaving, thinking, doing or talking.

Ibo

Shipibo term for mothers, guardians, owners of plants and other non-human beings. See also, "mothers of plants" in this glossary.

Icaros/chanting ícaros

Understanding what *ícaros* are and which practices they entangle is beyond the scope of this glossary and is an important theme that is discussed throughout the book. We have decided not to translate *ícaros* as "songs" because of their specificity and we have chosen to translate the verb "*icarear*" as "chanting *ícaros*" in order, again to distinguish this practice from the common idea of "singing". "*Icarado/a*" also exists, as an adjective, indicating something that has received an *ícaro*. These are very particular chants, which cannot be understood as "songs", or as part of a repertoire that can be learned from another *onanya*. These chants emerge from the learning experience of the *dietas* and according to the plants the *dieta* is being done with. Coming to understand what these chants are, what they are capable of and how they emerge is complex and this matter returns in various moments throughout the dialogues in this book. The *ícaros* lead the

ayahuasca ceremonies, enable a diagnostic process and influence the healing journeys. What can be "seen with the *ícaro*" and what the "*onanya* manages to chant" indicate that these chants crystallize, at the same time, the relationship between the *onanya* and the plants of the *dietas*, and their combined capacity of diagnosing and entering healing processes with patients. *Icaros* can also be "put upon" people, liquids (like plant decoctions or macerations, flower waters or other and upon fabrics). The *icaro* condenses and carries the *dietas* of the *onanya*.

Maestro/a

This translates literally as "teacher". It is often used as a synonym for *onanya* or *curandero/a*. It is a very common way of addressing the *onanya* in the local context.

Marear/mareación/mareo/mareado

This refers, as a verb, as a noun or as an adjective, to the effect resulting from the ingestion of ayahuasca or certain other plants. We could have translated it as "altered state", "dizziness", "drunkenness", "sickness" or "vertigo". None of these translations would have carried the way in which the *mareación/mareo* functions a space of medical research and healing action for the *onanya*. We have therefore kept the Spanish.

Meraya

The *meraya* are Shipibo plant experts, known for having a higher level of knowledge and initiation than the *onanya*. It is necessary to receive the *dietas* of a *meraya* to become one. It is often said that the *meraya* have disappeared in current times. The term *meraya* is linked to the verb *merati*, which has a number of translations. It is translated into Spanish as the verb "to find", "find" or "to visit" (Loriot, Lauriault y Day, 2008). José translates *meraya* as "the one who finds".

Onanya

The Shipibo term *onanya* is related to the verb *onanti*, which is translated into Spanish as knowledge, understanding: "to know, to

comprehend", literally, "with knowledge" or "the one who knows". It is often translated locally and nationally as "*curandero*" or "*ayahuasquero*". Onanya are also frequently described as locally "those who heal with plants" or "those who know how to work with plants".

Prueba

This word could be translated as "test" but we chose to keep it in Spanish. It stands for an important concept within José theorization of traditional medicine. Healing and learning means traversing these "tests", these *pruebas*. It entails being put to the test by plants but also embracing the test as a healing and learning opportunity. It also means becoming capable of recognizing what a *prueba* is, when and how it manifests in one's life.

Shitana

Shipibo term that José often uses as a kind of synonym for "*brujería*". At the same time, this word describes a diagnostic. Plants, plant experts and other non-human inhabitants of the forest have the ability to harm as well as to heal people. This ability to harm is known as *shitana*.

***Soplo* ("To blow *soplo*")**

"*Soplar*", the practice of blowing upon a person, a plant or an object has profound meanings. It can imply a form of cleaning, or it can accompany the chanting of an *arcana* and therefore the way in which an *arcana* is put upon someone. It requires the same skills as chanting. The "*soplo*", the "blowing" carries the *dietas* and therefore the knowhow, just as the *icaros* do. Therefore, we have chosen this translation to transmit the idea of "blowing breath" in English while also maintaining the specificity of the concept of "*soplo*" and what it implies.

Susto

An etiological category, this word indicates a cause of illness or misfortune. It is quite common among *mestizo* healing practices and diagnostics. Literally, it indicates a "shock", an experience of severe fear, and

also the ongoing consequences of this past "shock". It can sometimes be related to the term "trauma" as well.

Ucha

A form of "*brujería*" that a person or an object can carry. José refers to *ucha* as "the energy of an error", of a mistake, that stays within someone or something when the error is not processed, healed, repaired. It can be a diagnostic but can also be used to describe the energy of artefacts which have been wrongly extracted or appropriated from the people who made them.

Yobe

One of the Shipibo terms for plant experts. Different but complementary to the *onanya* and *meraya*. José translates this as "the one who protects" and also as "the one who knows how to fight against darkness". Even though all plant experts have been historically designated as *brujos* in the colonial context, it has become common to view *yobe* as "malevolent". However, it is discussed throughout the book that none of these plant specialists is malevolent *per se*. Their benevolence/malevolence is defined by the choices they make in terms of how they use their knowledge and competence.

This English version was published in 2026

Working with Plants who have Mothers

Dialogues with a Shipibo *onanya*



This book presents the words of a Shipibo *onanya* from the Peruvian Amazon in the form of a dialogue. Shipibo *onanya* are people who are experts in what they have come to name their "traditional medicine". What José López Sánchez presents here is based on what he has learned and practiced, as well as what he wants to defend today with regards to his expertise. What he shares with us in these dialogues is not a "compendium of his medicine", but rather a narrative about how that medicine is submitted to multiple forms of extraction.

The dialogues presented here question foreign understandings of the role of plants and of plant decoctions, and consider the case of ayahuasca in particular.

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