



The Globalization of Ayahuasca Shamanism and the Erasure of Indigenous Shamanism

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ABSTRACT

Ayahuasca is a hallucinogenic plant mixture used in a ceremonial context throughout western Amazonia, and its use has expanded globally in recent decades. As part of this expansion, ayahuasca has become popular among westerners who travel to the Peruvian Amazon in increasing numbers to experience its reportedly healing and transformative effects. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in and around the area of Iquitos, Peru, the epicenter of ayahuasca tourism, this paper focuses on some of the problematic aspects of western engagement with indigenous spiritual traditions. This engagement is usually based on idealized and romanticized notions of indigenous shamanism and an inability to digest its less palatable aspects, such as sorcery. Through ethnographic examples and ethnohistorical evidence, I show that the romanticization indigenous peoples is not benign. In fact, this one-sided romantic image hides the complexity of indigenous peoples' situations by erasing the injustices that they have experienced and continue to experience. I propose a more holistic approach to ayahuasca shamanism that views indigenous peoples not living in a fictitious harmony with nature but as people embedded in larger struggles and facing important challenges not the least of which is the recent commercialization of indigenous spirituality.

KEYWORDS: Ayahuasca, Shamanism, cultural appropriation, Amazonia, indigenous peoples

Shamanism is crucially a made-up, modern, western category, an artful reification of disparate practices, snatches of folklore and overarching folklorizations, residues of long-established myths intermingled with the

politics of academic departments, curricula, conferences, journal juries and articles, funding agencies, and so forth. [Taussig 1989:59]

This article deals with the globalization of ayahuasca shamanism and its ramifications for the way indigenous people are perceived. One of the most fascinating aspects of the study of shamanism is the genealogy of western approaches to it, which have been extensively discussed (Znamenski 2007; Boekhoven 2011). Taussig's definition is a good starting point as it includes academics in the creation of what we call shamanism. The western fascination with shamanism, both academic and popular, has been oscillating between extremes. Approaches to studying shamanism in the past have been one-sided, either romanticizing or demonizing, while more recent scholarship has focused more holistically, looking at both healing and violent elements as well as historical and political context (Whitehead and Wright 2004; Riboli and Torri 2013). In this paper, I argue that romanticizing indigenous knowledge is not benign, in the sense that a one-sided romantic image hides the complexity of indigenous peoples' situation and erases injustices that they have experienced and continue to experience.

Ayahuasca is a hallucinogenic plant mixture consumed in the form of a brew, which is prepared from the stems of *Banisteriopsis caapi* combined with the leaves of *Psychotria viridis* in order to induce the hallucinogenic effect. The *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine is indigenous to the western and northwestern Amazon, but its use has expanded globally. For decades, ayahuasca was the stuff of legend, associated with scientists and literary writers, from the pioneer field ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes to the poet Allen Ginsberg and the writer William Burroughs. Today its use has expanded to a global level and has had an enormous impact on religious and neo-shamanic currents in the West. It has also attracted the attention of scientists internationally, who conduct research with ayahuasca in order to determine possible uses for it in the West. The globalization of ayahuasca shamanism poses certain challenges, namely the persistence of engaged westerners to create romantic idealizations of "primitive" tribal peoples.

In indigenous Amazonian shamanism, ayahuasca had a variety of uses. Depending on the ethnic group, it was used in communal rituals of men, singing and dancing, for locating game animals, divination, in warfare and conflict, to see faraway places, and for healing by communicating with spirits. It was also important in native art, cosmology and ethnoastronomy, and in the Jaguar complex (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). Among indigenous Amazonians, ayahuasca is very important in maintaining social order and in interpreting daily life events. Shamans, being mediators between the spirit and the human worlds, need ayahuasca in order to move freely between the two and negotiate and restore relations between them. Shamans also contact the "master spirits of the

animals in order that the hunters may find game and influence the spirits of the seasons so that harvests will be abundant” (Langdon 1979:64). Ayahuasca is so fundamental for some groups like the Shuar (Jívaro) of the Ecuadorian Amazon that, as Michael Harner (1973) points out, the ayahuasca induced experience is seen as the true reality, whereas normal waking life is considered simply an illusion. For the Shuar, the true forces behind daily life are in the supernatural realm and can only be accessed through the psychedelic experience. In addition, in many tribal cultures ayahuasca, along with other mind altering plants, is viewed as an intelligent being possessing a spirit (*ayahuasca mama*) who is able to communicate and transmit knowledge to humans through the visionary state (Whitten 1976).

This paper is based on research that started with my dissertation fieldwork on shamanic tourism in Iquitos, Peru (Fotiou 2010) and has evolved into an ongoing project focusing mainly on interculturality. The larger issue I initially wanted to explore was how ayahuasca shamanism is constructed in different settings. More specifically, the question I set out to answer was “Why do westerners pursue shamanic experiences and how are these experiences constructed in the context of shamanic tourism?” I went to the Amazon looking for what most tourists are looking for: authentic shamans. Ironically, my first encounters were with western shamans, and this was an early lesson in the forces of globalization. Ayahuasca tourism, or as I like to call it *shamanic tourism*, is a relatively new phenomenon that has escalated in the last decade. However, the western fascination with shamanism—including psychoactive plants and substances and the changes in consciousness that they produce—is deeply rooted in western intellectual tradition. The western interest in ayahuasca is a continuation of this long history and belongs to its latest chapter that has been called the “psychedelic renaissance” (Joy 1992; Cloud 2007; Kotler 2010), dominated by the themes of healing, self-transformation, and the sacramental use of hallucinogens. This transformation of the subject is facilitated by contact with the radically Other, the premodern, spiritual, traditional, and sacred.

The first section of this article discusses the history of the western fascination with shamanism. This section is meant to give some context and is by no means exhaustive. It is followed by a discussion of some of the history of the Northwest Amazon, the epicenter of ayahuasca tourism today. Ayahuasca tourism is contextualized further in the third section in which I discuss and problematize some recent controversies among academics.



SHAMANISM AND THE WESTERN IMAGINATION

Shamanism has fascinated the western imagination at least since the 18th century (Flaherty 1992:97–98). Endless writings have attempted to interpret

this complex phenomenon. Because there are certain parallels between the ways the *shaman* and the *noble* (or ignoble) *savage* were constructed in the West, in this section I take a look at several interpretations of shamanism and place the phenomenon of shamanic tourism in the historical continuum of this long-standing and often contradictory relationship with shamanism. It is clear that looking at these interpretations reveals more about the interpreters than about shamanism itself. Admittedly, the West has had and continues to have an ambivalent relationship with shamanism. Many anthropologists would agree that the term *shaman* itself is problematic and many consider it a “desiccated,” “made-up, western category” (Geertz 1966; Taussig 1987, 1989).

The word *shaman*, commonly used today to refer to practitioners called *ayahuasqueros* or *curanderos* in Amazonia, comes from the Tunguz word *saman* (Eliade 1964). The word entered the European vocabulary in the 18th century from travelers and explorers in Siberia who were mostly Dutch or German native speakers (Laufer 1917; Flaherty 1992). Even though shamans are not the only religious figures in their societies, according to Mircea Eliade, the shaman alone is the “great master of ecstasy” (1964). In fact, because of Eliade’s work shamanism is still closely associated with altered states of consciousness (ASCs) even though some have challenged the usefulness of terms like trance and ecstasy as analytical tools when it comes to discussing shamanism (Hamayon 1993, 1998). According to Immanuel Casanowicz (1926) the Tunguz word for shaman means one who is “excited,” “moved,” or “raised.” Mihaly Hoppál (1987) adds that another translation of the word *saman* is “inner heat” and it comes from the Sanskrit word *saman* that means song. The word has been widely discussed and contested as being inappropriate for defining such a wide spectrum of traditional healing practitioners (Kehoe 2000) to the point that most anthropologists today prefer to speak of *shamanisms* (Atkinson 1992), and others argue that because the use of the term has changed so much over time it is impossible to arrive at an agreed upon operational definition (Jones 2006). Most definitions are either general and universal or context specific. In indigenous languages there is a specific word assigned to healers usually related to some important aspect of that culture’s healing complex. Atkinson has brought attention to the diverse approaches and theories on shamanism and warns of generalizing theories that might lead to “unwarranted reductionism and romantic exoticizing of a homogeneous non-Western ‘other’” (1992:309).

A historical overview of western approaches to shamanism reveals certain patterns that are important to point out if we are to show the evolution of the concept. The first reports of travelers on shamanism were sensationalistic and contributed to a view of the shamanistic phenomena as representative of the irrationality of the non-western Other or emphasized its fraudulent nature.

However, as priorities and attitudes shifted in the West, the concept became associated with spirituality, healing, closeness to nature, and an array of attractive and desirable attributes. Both the original dismissal of shamanism and its reverence today are stereotypes and do not take into account the complexity of lived experience. Dagmar Wernitznig (2003) discusses two discourses in relation to indigenous people and knowledge: the Good Indian and the Bad Indian, otherwise known as the *noble* and the *ignoble savage*. He identifies two historical traditions that gave birth to the above discourses. Classical thought emphasized the idyllic state of simplicity and integrity, while the Judeo-Christian thought focused more on bestial and devilish interpretations of the primitive. In both discourses, the savage is perceived in opposition to the civilized West, and both are equally one-dimensional and static. They view the Other as frozen in time and are reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. Within the discourse of the Good Indian, we find the stereotype of the Indian as keeper of the earth, a very familiar image in the 20th century.

Roberte Hamayon (1998) suggests three trends in the history of the approaches to shamanic behavior: devilization, medicalization, and idealization. She places the first one historically in the 17th and 18th centuries. Early chroniclers were Christian clergy who described shamans as “ministers of the devil” (Narby and Huxley 2001:9) and viewed shamans in opposition to Christianity and as “taken” by evil spirits. During the Enlightenment, primitivist ideas were used to educate with no intention to encourage people to appropriate savage ways of living (Wernitznig 2003). Rather, the intention was to use them as a commentary on the civilized society’s malaise. During that time, we see a split in the ways shamans were described. One approach presented them as “charlatans,” “imposters,” and “magicians.” For example, Denis Diderot, the first writer to define “shaman” and the chief editor of the *Encyclopedie*, referred to shamans as Siberian “imposters” who perform “tricks that seem supernatural to an ignorant and superstitious people” (Diderot 2001:32). The Russian botanist Stepan Krasheninnikov reported that the beliefs of the natives of eastern Siberia were “absurd” and “ridiculous” (2001:29). The second trend was “medicalization” and is associated with the 19th century and colonialism (Chaumeil 1999). Jane Monnig Atkinson (1992) called this psychologizing of shamanism, and it relates to concerns with either the psychopathological aspects or the therapeutic aspects of shamanic behavior. The first scholarly literature on shamanism underlined the similarities of the shamanic trance to pathological states such as schizophrenia. Eliade (1964), George Devereux (1961), Anthony Wallace (1966), Julian Silverman (1967), E. Loeb (1929), and Paul Radin (1937) have all in one way or another defined the shamanic state as pathological. Later this bias was lifted and authors such as Erika Bourguignon (1968) have pointed out its healing aspects (Peters and Price-Williams 1980:402).

The third—and more relevant to the current discussion—stage in Hamayon's typology (1998) is the "idealization" of shamanism. This trend can be traced historically to the 19th century but reached a peak in the 20th century. We can find traces of this approach in European romanticism, with its attraction to the spiritual and the mysterious, as well as in American transcendentalism and the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, both of which had a similar "organic approach to nature and spirituality" (Znamenski 2007:24). Echoing this romantic perpetuation of the nature–culture dichotomy and inspired by anti-modernist sentiments, shamanism is viewed as the most *archaic* religious form and as Hamayon stated is "praised as representative of a genuinely *natural* philosophy particularly useful in our modern Technocratic World. Primitive is turned into primordial, wild into ecological, magic into mystic, makeshift into artistic" (2001:3). In fact this nostalgia about the past and hopeful idealism about the future seems to be a common theme of modernity. This approach echoes what Renato Rosaldo called imperialist nostalgia (1989), the sort of nostalgia that conquerors feel about the conquered, which as he pointedly argued, is not innocent.

In the 1960s, several countercultures identified with the image of the noble savage as an alternative to civilization and indigenous peoples were imagined in some kind of idyllic harmony with nature (Ellen 1986). For the first time, we see widespread use of psychedelics for spiritual purposes and shamanism was approached as a form of spirituality and a source of creativity. During this time Carl Gustav Jung became popular, partly because of his anti-modern message and partly because he opened the door to the recognition of the role of the sacred and the spiritual in psychological development. At this time, we see the appearance of shamanism in the mainstream and Eliade's and Carlos Castaneda's work play a fundamental role in this. It has been argued that Eliade "made shamanism go global" (Znamenski 2007:180). Eliade contributed to the idealization of shamanism with his phenomenological approach, studying shamanism in its own terms without "reducing" it to social life, history, economics, or brain function. He approached shamanism as archaic spirituality and looked for universal ideas, symbols, and metaphors like the *axis mundi* (Eliade 1964). He stressed that the shamanic universe consisted of three levels, the universality of which has been debated by other scholars. Both Eliade and Jung were interested in identifying cross-cultural archetypes of spirituality and both believed that westerners could restore harmony by learning from the non-western Other. Several scholars, including some anthropologists, followed in their footsteps. Peter Furst (1976) agreed that shamanism was the oldest form of religion and the foundation for all other religions. Barbara Myerhoff (1976) also looked for universal patterns among spiritual practitioners and considered shamanism to be a transcendental phenomenon unrelated to socioeconomic circumstance (Znamenski

2007). She also lamented the spiritual poverty of the Western world and the fact that Western society did not have shamans (1976).

During the 1980s and later, we see an emphasis on the image of the *spiritual* noble savage, showing inner harmony (with oneself) and outer harmony (with the environment; Wernitznig 2003). The environmentalist movement found in indigenous knowledge the potential remedies for civilization's problems, popularizing the stereotype of the wise, prophetic Indian, which is still with us today. During this time, neoshamanisms¹ claimed a strong concern for ecology and everything that is considered to be "natural." Anthropologist Michael Harner introduced his method of core shamanism, a self-reliant system that is purposely culture free so as to be more easily adapted by westerners to their own use (Harner 1980). He founded the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in 1979 and has been training westerners in shamanic techniques since then. This is possible because "core shamanism can be transplanted into any cultural setting as a skeleton around which a person can build his or her own spirituality" (Znamenski 2007:242), a model that fits very well with western individualism. In his widely read book *The Way of the Shaman*, Harner described shamans as "keepers of a remarkable body of ancient techniques that they use to achieve and maintain well-being and healing for themselves and members of their communities" (1980:xiii). This and similar definitions of shamanism seem to be popular among contemporary spiritual seekers.

One problem with a lot of shamanism-related literature is that shamanism has been traditionally presented out of context. This started with Eliade who "turned the inspirational religious practices of north Asia into a timeless mystery" (Humphrey 1994:191). He popularized an ideal type of Siberian Shamanism and his model was adopted later by others as a point of comparison for other regions. Castaneda also perpetuated this by stressing that shamanism and sorcery did not have any borders (Znamenski 2007) and concluded that "sorcery does not have a cultural focus" (De Mille 1976:71). Recent scholarship departs from this early framework and is concerned with the particular. In my research I looked at how, depending on context and the agents involved, the views of shamanism, and ayahuasca in particular, change. Its appropriation by western agents has not only changed the global discourse around shamanism but also the local one. However, while the interest of scholars has shifted to context-specific studies of shamanism (e.g. Thomas and Humphrey 1994), the general public still embraces ayahuasca and Amazonian shamanism in the framework of a universal spirituality not attached to a particular cultural context. As a college student I was also attracted to the universal appeal of shamanism that I found in Eliade's work; however, while exploring the literature, not only was I fascinated by the historical evolution of the concept of shamanism but I was confronted with a

real dilemma when I started my fieldwork in Iquitos. The shamans I worked with bore no resemblance to the timeless bearers of universal knowledge that I encountered in Eliade's work as a student. I either had to reject them as fakes or treat them as what they were: not archetypes but real people operating in a particular socio-cultural context.

As this brief overview shows, we might not be closer to understanding shamanic practices but it is certain that our understanding of it has evolved. As Narby and Huxley concluded, "Even after five hundred years of reports on shamanism, its core remains a mystery. One thing that has changed, however, is the gaze of the observers. It has opened up. And understanding is starting to flower" (Narby and Huxley 2001:8).



SHAMANIC TOURISM IN WESTERN AMAZONIA

I will now turn to Western Amazonia and Iquitos, Peru in particular where the phenomenon of ayahuasca or shamanic tourism has flourished in the last decades. In my dissertation (Fotiou 2010) I argued that I do not see shamanic tourism as an anomaly but as consistent with the nature of shamanic knowledge, which has always been exchanged across and between cultures. Traditionally, in South American shamanism power and symbolism have been sought outside a particular cultural milieu. Moreover, in the West, esoteric knowledge has often been sought in faraway places (Helms 1988). I also found commonalities with pilgrimage in that western participants pursue these experiences for healing and personal transformation—the two central themes of pilgrimages cross-culturally (Dubisch and Winkelmann 2005). At the same time I acknowledged the potentially problematic aspects of this intercultural exchange between what I see as unequal parties—namely westerners and local shamans (indigenous and mestizo)—in that the former fail to make the association of shamanism with exploitation.

I find it important to focus on some of the exploitative history of the area that has been associated with the form of shamanism we know today (Taussig 1987; Gow 1994). In addition, I am hoping that it will put current relations of power into the historical context. Anthropologists, such as Peter Gow (1994), have argued that ayahuasca shamanism with a focus on healing, is a result of colonialism and a response to a brutal history, specifically the mission experience and the rubber boom era² (1880–1912). It has also been argued that ayahuasca shamanism was transmitted from indigenous people to mestizos during the rubber boom era. The hypothesis is that when these settlers became sick they went to indigenous healers, and some might have become apprentices and upon their return started servicing their communities (Beyer 2009:301). Either way, if we take into account the long-existing

links between jungle and Andean populations, it is plausible that intercultural exchange of shamanic knowledge took place long before the rubber boom.

Conquest of the jungle was driven by powerful economic interests. This created a discourse that dehumanized indigenous people and turned them into resources to be harvested (Hill 1999:744), and indigenous people were stereotyped as wild, cannibalistic savages (Hill 1999:745). The rubber boom was the most definitive period in the history of the area and Jonathon Hill goes as far as to say that “had it not been for the rapid decline of rubber gathering in lowland South America, it is doubtful that any indigenous peoples of the southern lowlands would have survived in the twentieth century” (1999:753). The main labor force that collected rubber consisted of mestizos who entered the work force voluntarily and members of a number of indigenous groups of the area, such as the Huitoto, Bora, and Andoke (Hvalkof 2000:94). The most notorious case of atrocities committed against indigenous people during the rubber boom was that of Putumayo, an area between Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia where the greatest violence against indigenous people took place. This portion of Amazonian history is described as a holocaust by Soren Hvalkof (2000). The rubber barons who were responsible for the enslavement and decimation of indigenous people, Carlos Fitzcarrald, Máximo Rodríguez, Julio Arana, and others, are seen today, by the Peruvian state, as fearless pioneers and defenders of the Peruvian sovereignty and are presented as national heroes (Rummenhoeller 1985:6). These characters have achieved mythological status through foreign media, one example being Werner Herzog’s film “Fitzcarraldo” (1982), and are used as standards in the modern colonization and development efforts of the Amazon. The city of Iquitos became prominent and affluent during that era and locals often talk about it as a golden era, during which Iquitos had an opera and a tramway.

The rubber boom changed the region in fundamental ways, and its effects can be seen today. Indigenous populations were immensely reduced or displaced. Some speak of “Indian Hunts” (Román et al. 1994:153). Many indigenous people were captured or killed, and others escaped to the interior of the jungle away from the riverbanks (Román et al. 1994:157). Disease also contributed to the decline of the population. Many indigenous groups left the areas where they traditionally lived,³ while others such as the Huitoto and the Bora were nearly wiped out (Taylor 1999). The cultural changes during the rubber boom are reflected in today’s jungle culture, a synthesis of the relations that were created during that time (Román et al. 1994:162). For example, even after the end of rubber extraction indigenous people remained trapped and subjected in a feudal system known as *habilitación* (Gow 1994), in which they came to possess the lower stratum. Villages gave place to *fundos* or *haciendas*, where life revolved around the feudal house (Román et al.

1994:163). The relations of dominance and dependence between Indians and patrons were preserved for long after the end of the rubber boom (Maybury-Lewis 1999). Indigenous communities in the area were also affected by the war with Ecuador in 1941, and it was not until the 1960s that the lowlands moved into the center of national thinking. In the second half of the 20th century, the population of Iquitos increased considerably due to migration from the jungle, and the city expanded and became increasingly more urbanized (Rumrill 1983). At the same time, exportation of lumber increased.

In the last decades, Iquitos became the ecotourism gateway to the Amazon. It is surrounded by a number of jungle lodges and is relatively close to a nature reserve (Pacaya Samiria). As interest in ayahuasca among Westerners increased, lodges started offering optional ayahuasca ceremonies as part of their ecotourism packages in the 1990s. Today, there are an increasing number of lodges that specialize in ayahuasca retreats. Most facilities focusing on ayahuasca ceremonies and catering to Westerners are on the road that leads from Iquitos to Nauta—the only road connecting Iquitos to another town. A few more experienced ayahuasca partakers will often participate in ceremonies held in the city in the house of a shaman. Ayahuasca retreats around Iquitos have websites and bring groups directly from the United States or Europe through established contacts there. Some have offices in the city for the tourists that come to Iquitos looking for a tour. Most hotels and some restaurants will refer clients to these offices and get commissions as well. In the last few years, local restaurants frequented by tourists started offering food appropriate for “ayahuasca diet⁴” and feature boards with flyers advertising retreats or shamans. Consequently, there is great competition for tourists and often rivalries arise between locals that take the form of spreading rumors about competitors. Because of this, most companies prefer to bring groups directly from abroad.

During my fieldwork between 2003 and 2005, there was a small but steady flow of visitors that were in Iquitos specifically for ayahuasca. In 2005, an employee of the municipal tourist office told me that they estimate the number of ayahuasca tourists (I interpret this to be tourists traveling to Iquitos specifically to take ayahuasca) to be about 200 a year, a number that at the time seemed realistic based on my own observations. In the last few years, this number is estimated to be in the thousands, but systematic data need to be collected to corroborate this number. One of the reasons for this dramatic increase is that in the summer of 2005 an American living in Iquitos started organizing an annual conference on shamanism in order to bring scientists and shamans together, providing a safe environment for first time users to learn about ayahuasca and participate in ceremonies between conference sessions. The first conference had 200 attendees with similar numbers in the consequent years. This means that hundreds of new visitors started coming

to Iquitos specifically for ayahuasca. Another event that spiked interest in ayahuasca and Iquitos was an article published in *National Geographic Travel* (Salak 2006), which made such an impression that it attracted an even greater number of visitors.

Iquitos is a paradoxical place, where modernity coexists with a universe of fantastical tales. Amazonian myths and folktales are frequently told, and these stories reveal both the worldview of their creators and traces of the historical trauma they experienced. Such are the stories of the spirits that will eat people's fat or steal their organs (*Pishtacos*) and of pink dolphins transforming into gringos (an artistic rendition of which you can see in Figure 1) to have sex and impregnate local women. Some of these stories may reflect anxiety regarding strangers and foreign predators, a fact that escapes many of the westerners engaging with ayahuasca shamanism, namely that they are entering a space of ambivalence in which they can be both predators and prey.

Even though westerners view ayahuasca as a healing tool for a variety of ailments, ayahuasca shamanism was more complex and played a central role in the social life of the indigenous people of the area. Today it continues to play an important role even though its form and significance have changed through the work of missionaries as well as acculturation. Most ethnographies treat ayahuasca shamanism "as part of an unbroken pre-Columbian tradition" (Gow 1994:90), and ayahuasca shamanism is seen as completely integrated within the traditional culture. In Western Amazonia today, healing



FIGURE 1. AN ARTIST'S RENDITION OF THE PINK DOLPHIN THAT CAN TRANSFORM INTO A WHITE MAN.

is at the center of ayahuasca shamanism. However, according to Gow (1994), it was developed in the new jungle urban centers, which were established by Jesuit and Franciscan missions in the area. On the basis of this fact that indigenous peoples who did not have direct contact with outsiders—such as the Sharanahua, Cashinahua, Culina, and Harakmbut—“use ayahuasca, but in very different contexts from that of ayahuasca shamanism” (Gow 1994:110). More recent scholarship also indicates more recent introduction of ayahuasca to certain indigenous groups (Langdon and Santana de Rose 2012; Shepard 2014). These examples challenge claims of the primordality of ayahuasca shamanism.

Michael Brown (1989) has remarked on the recent tendency of both academics and the public to focus only on the positive and healing aspects of shamanism. While western cultures make a clear distinction between good and bad and light and dark (Fausto 2004), there is no such clear distinction in Amazonian shamanism, “which thrives on ambivalence” (Fausto 2004:172). Shamans have an “ambiguous position in society” (Langdon 1992:14) because they may employ power in negative ways, especially when they direct it against enemies outside of their social group. The sources from where shamans appropriate their power are ambivalent—they have the power to heal as well as harm. According to much Amazonian ethnography, it is not uncommon for shamans to engage in shamanic rivalries, wars, and duplicity (Hugh-Jones 1994:32–37).

Most popular and New Age literature presents an overly positive picture of shamanism throughout the world. In this era of western fascination with shamanism, its dark side has been covert. A result of this romanticization of shamanism is that even when there is evidence of malevolent shamans there is a tendency to dismiss them as “pseudo shamans.” This is not only a western phenomenon. As Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer notes in Siberia, “there is a tendency to romanticize ‘true traditional’ Sakha shamans as fully benevolent, priestly, and white” (1996:313). However, she reports that according to her consultants a shaman is not truly great unless he evokes both feelings of love and fear (1996:313). The romanticization of shamanism and similar traditions is not necessarily only an effect of Western interest in them. The focus on shamanic rivalries and competition makes indigenous peoples themselves uneasy, and it appears that they might choose to forget the negative aspects of their spiritual tradition, especially if we take into account that these traditions were demonized and suppressed for a long time (Mandelstam Balzer 1996:314).

Recent scholarly work on the subject of shamanism in Amazonia stresses that “Amazonian shamanism is not a loving shamanism” (Fausto 2004). The concept of energy is a key metaphor in Amazonian worldview and is related to the soul, power, desire, and intention. Power resides in the human body

and is affected by the ingestion or expulsion of substances. Object intrusion is considered a common cause of illness and is considered to be the consequence of malevolent intent and ascribed to sorcery and witchcraft. The healing shaman sucks the foreign object from the patient's body and spits it out. In this worldview, good and evil are not fixed categories but are relational and highly contextual. In accordance with New Age vocabulary, the phenomenon of sorcery and shamanic warfare is perceived by some westerners as a universal battle between good and evil, and they fail to see it as contextualized in local conflicts. Brown (1985, 1989) argues that the analytical notion of a strict distinction between benevolent and malevolent shamans is an oversimplification because the shamans' power to heal or kill comes from the same source. In addition, shamans have to negotiate constantly in order to continue to be considered benevolent actors in the local social relations. This is also attested by Robert Murphy who argues that among the Mundurucú shamans, in addition to having the capacity of curing disease, they also have the capacity of inflicting harm on others and sorcerers are shamans "gone bad" (1960:135). As a result, they are considered to be the bearers of a latent and generalized aggression; they are often blamed for tragedies in the community and many sorcerers have been executed for this reason.

In societies where social life is based on an ethic of sharing and cooperation, as in Amazonia or the Pacific, people depend on each other for subsistence and all difficulties are believed to be the result of malevolent action by someone (Lepowsky 1993). Beliefs in sorcery have been seen by scholars as "social equalizers ensuring that people of all ages and both sexes receive the respect of others" (Lepowsky 1993:201). While such beliefs and accusations might exacerbate social conflict (Lepowsky 1993), they might also be a way to keep people in check. Sorcery reveals a lot about social relations, in this case possible social tensions (Lepowsky 1993). Today envy as well as sexual jealousy are the most common motives for sorcery. According to much of the anthropological literature, sorcery accusations and practice increases in zones where there is pressure, poverty, and competition over limited resources, especially in zones created as a result of colonial processes. Another proposition is that in certain cases healing appears to be a mask put on traditional customs in order to be tolerated by colonial and modernizing powers (Hamayon 1998). In any case, it seems that modernity has not eradicated "irrational" beliefs but rather exacerbated them (Izquierdo and Johnson 2007). In Amazonia, among the locals, the financially successful shamans are often considered to be sorcerers. According to some of my consultants, these shamans have managed to be successful with outsiders because they have been aided by spirits who are considered to take control of the shaman in question and use them to pursue their own purposes.

Stephen Hugh-Jones (1994:35) indicates that the ambivalence of shamanism has been described as either sociopolitical, when shamans use their powers to harm enemies on the one hand and cure members of their own group on the other, or as the product of apprenticeship, in the case of those shamans who fail to exercise self-control and master their emotions or aggressive desires, thereby becoming sorcerers. As one of my consultants warned me during my fieldwork, shamanic powers entail a certain risk. Not only must all shamans contend with the fact that certain spirits ask them to commit harm in return for their healing powers, but novice shamans also frequently experience, and must learn to control, their own urges to harm or kill (Perruchon 2003; Beyer 2009). Thus, far from being the spiritual and healing tradition that westerners seek, accusations of sorcery attacks abound in the area with westerners themselves often being the victims. It is also clear from the above that in indigenous Amazonian societies the shaman's position is not an enviable one. Often they have no real power or more resources than anybody else in the community and when they do they are suspected of sorcery. Because they are capable of both healing and destruction how they are perceived depends on context—a context of which most westerners engaging with ayahuasca shamanism are oblivious. In addition, western interest has elevated some individual shamans, either because they make more money or because they are approached by foreigners as wise gurus or spiritual teachers.

As we saw, not only has colonialism played an important role in the development of ayahuasca shamanism as we know it, but as the recent debates I will discuss below show, the globalization of ayahuasca shamanism continues to transform it. Something that was meant to heal the effects of colonial encroachments, paradoxically today is healing the ailments of westerners. What does this mean for the way indigenous peoples are perceived today?



THE TROUBLE WITH APPROPRIATIONS

Shamanic tourism is one among many examples of appropriation of indigenous knowledge by westerners. Another notable example is Tibetan Buddhism as discussed by Donald Lopez (1998). He discusses the different and sometimes even conflicting images of Tibetan Buddhism, often considered in opposition to western culture. Similarly to some of the portrayals of ayahuasca, Tibet is imagined to embody the spiritual and the ancient and to hold wisdom lost to westerners. Lopez concludes that this idealization of Tibet might end up harming the cause of Tibetan independence (1998:11). Another example is Sierra Mazateca as discussed by Benjamin Feinberg (2003), an area that attracted many westerners for similar reasons that ayahuasca does: to experience the exotic and divine Other in the form of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Feinberg argues that

in this case “mushrooms are used as part of the struggle over the definition of a legitimate way of appropriating culture” (2003:145). Several scholars have pointed out that even positive stereotypes perpetuate erroneous and detrimental assumptions about the Other (Waldron and Newton 2012). Alice Beck Kehoe (2000) has argued that New Age and neoshamanism appropriation misrepresent or dilute indigenous practices and subtly reinforce racist ideas such as the Noble Savage image.

Currently discourse on ayahuasca shamanism is going through a fascination phase, possibly mainstreaming phase, which comes with its own perils. Many celebrities are promoting ayahuasca and recommend it openly as a life changing experience (Morris 2014). It has appeared in TV shows, on mainstream media, and is touted as a possible cure for post-traumatic stress disorder (Escobedo 2014). Naturally these media appearances omit certain aspects of ayahuasca shamanism that are less “digestible,” like sorcery. All this is understandable; considering the legal situation with these plants, even scholars researching ayahuasca are reluctant to promote these negative aspects fearing a backlash.

Like other scholars, what I have observed among Western ayahuasca participants is a tendency to reinforce stereotypes. Indigenous peoples are still perceived as close to nature, wise, and spiritual and their traditions, most importantly, are presented as endangered. However, indigenous peoples are critical of some of the seemingly “positive” representations in Western media that they see as harmful. Jimmy Nelson’s (2013) exhibit and book *Before They Pass Away* is an example of this, and the reactions of indigenous leaders are very telling. Davi Kopenawa, Yanomamö shaman and activist, was quoted to have said:

I saw the photos and I did not like them. This man only wants to force his own ideas on the photos, to publish them in books and to show them to everyone so that people will think he’s a great photographer. He does whatever he wants with indigenous peoples. It is not true that indigenous peoples are about to die out. We will be around for a long time, fighting for our land, living in this world, and continuing to create our children.
[Vidal 2014]

Similar sentiments were echoed by Nixiwaka Yawanawá from Acre in Brazil (Vidal 2014). What these examples show and what many westerners who are looking for guidance or direction from indigenous cultures do not realize is that indigenous peoples do not live in some harmonious state with nature but are people embedded in larger struggles and face important challenges.

At the same time that indigenous activists are fighting to defend their territories and their way of life and many of them are murdered for doing so⁵ (Dearden 2015), westerners fascinated by shamanism flock to retreat centers charging thousands of dollars with an incredible array of amenities to have

“authentic” shamanic experiences and to connect to ancient spiritual traditions while healing themselves. Critics have called such forms of commercialization and appropriation of indigenous knowledge for outsiders’ use as “cultural imperialism” (Meyer and Royer 2001). Robert Wallis (2003) pointed out that “neoshamans” tend to take knowledge from indigenous people and not give something in return, which is true in certain cases. Often people who commercialize ayahuasca and train westerners as shamans claim to have permission from indigenous peoples to gain legitimacy. One such case came to the spotlight recently when the Cofán from the Colombian Amazon, from whom the proprietor of an organization in Europe⁶ claimed had permission to disseminate ayahuasca, issued a statement denouncing his activities, which was supported by many academics (ICEERS 2015, Uribe 2015).

Besides cases of appropriation like the aforementioned, scholars have warned about the ramifications of removing indigenous religious traditions from their context. Vitebsky noted that New Age in its cosmopolitanism “moves away from cosmology by dissolving the realm of the religious” (2003:277). He also argues that while the New Age adopts certain elements of indigenous knowledge such as shamanism, “its full implications are too challenging even for radicals to accommodate” (Vitebsky 2003:293). Shamanism, in this context, loses its cosmological significance. Notably, indigenous healing systems aim to restore balance in the patient’s body, in their family, and in their community. More recently shamanic revitalizations have become about restoring identity, finding value in indigenous traditions, and restoring dignity and well-being (Wright 2013; Langdon, this issue). Some indigenous groups that did not traditionally use ayahuasca have also “appropriated” it and used it to revitalize their cultures (Langdon and Santana de Rose 2012). Is this use more legitimate because the appropriators are indigenous?

Based on my own observations in the Peruvian Amazon, current concerns of indigenous communities in the area revolve around material survival, protection of indigenous territories, and dignity. At the same time that ayahuasca shamanism has expanded globally and is used in a variety of settings and reinvented as a healing and transformational tool for the New Age, some indigenous communities around Iquitos have not used it in decades. During a recent visit to a Cucama community in the Peruvian Amazon, I discovered that there were no shamans in the community. They did not use nor cultivate ayahuasca. The only young man that was training to be a shaman was doing so through dreams as there were no elders to teach him. The community’s biggest concern was how to generate income by preserving their traditional knowledge and language and keeping their land intact through an ecotourism project. It is entirely plausible that as shamanism is revitalized in this community they might incorporate it into their ecotourism project and use it to generate much needed income. On another visit to an indigenous

school training indigenous bilingual teachers, I saw the need to not only revitalize indigenous languages but also to recover dignity for indigenous peoples and revalorize their medicinal knowledge. Peru still struggles with racism and a social and economic system in which indigenous peoples occupy the lower strata (Gow 1994). This long history has left scars in urgent need of healing before meaningful intercultural exchange can happen. In the meantime, indigenous groups are working hard to teach new generations to be proud of their heritage (Figure 2).

Meanwhile, there seems to be a lot of disagreement regarding the future of ayahuasca use and who should be its legitimate “stewards.” A recent controversy pertained to the goals of an NGO⁷ who aimed for a “safer and more sustainable ayahuasca” (Wickerham et al. 2014). The NGO in question aimed to create a certification system for ayahuasca centers—based on the Fair Trade model—that would facilitate and promote safety. The original goals of the NGO were related to the sustainability of the plants themselves, but preliminary research revealed an array of issues, which led them to expand their definition of sustainability. The data for this report came from interviews with what they called local “stakeholders,” many of whom were indigenous. Given the current demand for ayahuasca and that the vine takes years to mature, the sustainability of the plants is a legitimate concern. During my numerous visits to Peru I have discussed this with people who cook ayahuasca, and it is clear that most still buy the plants and that in most cases it is unclear from where they come. It might also be realistic to say that tons of ayahuasca are exported from Peru every year. Recently more centers make a point of planting vines on their property, but it will take years before these

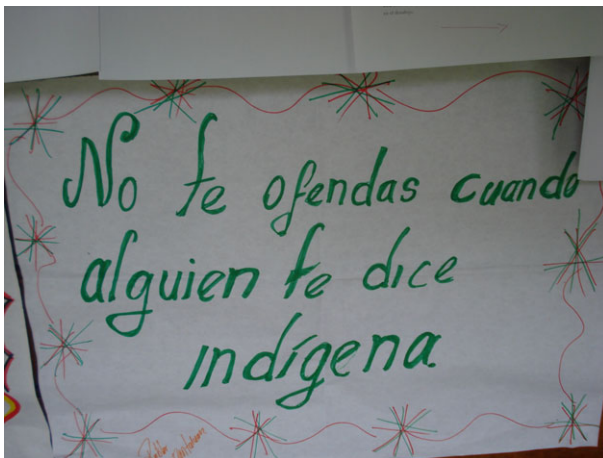


FIGURE 2. SIGN MADE BY THE STUDENTS AT A LOCAL BILINGUAL TEACHER SCHOOL. IT READS: “DON’T BE OFFENDED WHEN SOMEONE CALLS YOU INDIGENOUS.”

plants mature enough to satisfy their needs (Figure 3). Tracing the routes and sources of the plants currently used is badly needed; coming up with ways to secure plant supply and at the same time protect the forest more so. In addition to plant sustainability, the report brought up safety concerns and proposed the development of a set of “best practices” to which ayahuasca retreat centers would then voluntarily adhere (Wickerham et al. 2014). Health safety and sexual abuse were among the issues mentioned.

While it is true that projects like this derive from a capitalist framework, for better or worse it is the structure within which we all have to operate, including indigenous peoples who are struggling to find a dignified position in it. Some of the criticisms, especially regarding their alarmist discourse disseminated through social media, were fair. In addition, the scope of the NGO’s goals was too broad, proposing to tackle too many issues, ones that emerged during their preliminary research, but nevertheless, experts were unconvinced that these were realistic. However, the NGO did argue that more research was required and if in consequent stages they involved local academics and utilized existing resources such as students and faculty from local universities, worthwhile projects could have developed from this. Some of the criticisms raised made less sense. The academics’ response underestimated the safety concerns and overestimated the “community-based means of regulation in the Amazon that already exist and function” (Rush et al. 2014). They did not clarify what those means of regulation are, but, in my own experience, the surge in ayahuasca tourism in the last decade has created a rather chaotic state of affairs with little regulation, at least in Peru.

Another reason the NGO became so controversial among academics was that in their report they spoke of including indigenous communities as “stakeholders” and of developing sustainable ayahuasca tourism in those



FIGURE 3. PLANTING AYAHUASCA VINE AT A LOCAL AYAHUASCA CENTER.

communities (Rush et al. 2014). This was perceived as neoliberal discourse, and they claimed that this would promote ayahuasca tourism. They specifically stated that “all ayahuasca practices have operated outside of a western market-driven approach in the past, and that currently westerners are not the only ayahuasca participants” (Rush et al. 2014). While the second part of this statement is true, it is hard to defend the first one. Statements like this imply that indigenous peoples have magically lived untouched by capitalism. As I have shown, most indigenous peoples have been part of the global capitalist system, and ayahuasca shamanism as we know it today has been directly linked to the exploitative history of the last few centuries. From my observations in Peru, indigenous men are often employed in extractive economies that not only destroy the environment on which they depend, but also remove the men employed this way from their communities for months at a time. Given how disruptive this is, it is not surprising that some are interested in finding more sustainable ways to generate income. My understanding of the controversy by talking to some of the parties involved was that the controversial report was the result of preliminary research in areas of the Peruvian Amazon during which indigenous communities were consulted and expressed an interest in capitalizing on ayahuasca tourism. Some have already argued that tourism can help preserve indigenous cultures, especially in the context of ecotourism managed by indigenous people (Zografos and Kenrick 2005). The commercialization of ayahuasca is something that is already happening at an alarming rate, and it has forever changed the local “landscape,” although until now mostly foreign proprietors with enough capital have benefited from it. If entire communities were involved in tourism to generate income for the community instead of individual shamans partnering with foreigners, there would be more potential for growth as opposed to what has been happening in the last decades. It seems though that commercialization creates uneasiness if done by indigenous peoples. Cases like this make me concerned that even among academics there are degrees of essentializing indigenous peoples, and some of us might even assume that we know what is good or proper for them better than they do.

This controversy made me realize that sometimes indigenous peoples’ agency might make them seem unscrupulous or worse in the eyes of certain Others. It reminded me of the Brazilian government official in the documentary “At the Edge of Conquest” (O’Connor 1992) who tells the Waiapi, who are trying to navigate the Brazilian bureaucracy to protect their land from miners, that it would be detrimental to their cause to take things into their own hands and commit any violence against the miners. He advises them to remain *victims* to advance their cause. I wonder whether the same sentiment is echoed when people, including academics, are alarmed when indigenous peoples even speak of commercializing ayahuasca. It might be perceived as

compromising authenticity or, as often is the case, it is used as justification by outsiders who might be commercializing ayahuasca themselves. Indigenous peoples often find themselves in the impossible position in which they can only “win” if they conform to stereotypes. I concur with David Waldron and Janice Newton when they say that “romanticism damages empathetic and solid relationships between differing cultures, exaggerating otherness and hindering appreciation of commonalities and issues confronting actual Indigenous peoples” (2012:78), and I wonder whether academics are as unaffected by romanticism as we consider ourselves to be.



CONCLUSION

When indigenous knowledge is appropriated, it takes on the fragmentary nature of our society (Vitebsky 2003:296). As I have shown, global culture seems unable to capture the holistic nature of indigenous knowledge because there is a lack of context for belief and application. I caution that this might contribute to the further marginalization of indigenous knowledge, something that should be taken seriously. Although westerners are having meaningful and transformative experiences, positive stereotyping is still problematic and there is the real danger of the erasure of indigenous peoples’ plights and injustices against them. The history of shamanism in Amazonia, including its recent “appropriation” by indigenous groups, indicates that contemporary ayahuasca shamanism is a response to external forces and an exploitative history. Westerners who want to have a more meaningful exchange with the traditions they admire should also keep in mind that they are engaging with these traditions from a position of privilege. Disenfranchised Peruvians, indigenous, or mestizos have a narrower range of choices and often shamanic tourism is the most lucrative or more reasonable source of income at a time when their land and resources are stripped away. Even though shamanic tourism is a complex phenomenon, in this paper I chose to focus on the aspect of stereotyping that is still plaguing much discourse around shamanism. The question is no longer whether capitalism will touch indigenous people; the question is how and in what terms. Considering what is at stake, we might want to envision and work toward ways that indigenous communities can participate in a capitalist system, if they wish to do so, without jeopardizing their collective well-being.

I hope that my musings can rekindle a conversation that has been going on in academia for years. As Brown has eloquently said “anthropologists cannot play a constructive role in fostering higher levels of cultural sensitivity by self-righteously denouncing ‘the appropriation of beliefs’ and pillorying Indian wannabes and other New Agers as postcolonial exploiters” (1994:13).

Given the history of shamanism in the West and in light of the recent debates I discussed, I hope to see both academic and popular discourse move away from stereotyping into more meaningful intercultural dialogue between equals.



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NOTES

- 1 Neoshamanism is defined as “a form of shamanism that has been created at the end of the 20th century to reestablish a link for modern man to his spiritual roots, to reintroduce shamanic behavior into the lives of westerners in search of spirituality and, thereby, renew contact with nature” (Jakobsen 1999:xi).
- 2 Gow goes as far as saying that ayahuasca shamanism has evolved in urban centers in the last few hundred years and has been introduced to isolated indigenous peoples (1994:91), a provocative claim that nevertheless deserves serious consideration given the history of the region.
- 3 One such example is that of the Piro or Yine who have been dispersed to different Peruvian locations and their history has been irrevocably changed (see Gow 1991; Gow 1994; Gow 2001).
- 4 The ayahuasca diet entails abstaining from a number of things, including salt, spices, fat, pork, red meat, and sex.
- 5 As I write these lines, news of the murder of Lenca indigenous activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras (Watts 2016a) along with news of the violent clashes with police that followed (Watts 2016b) are flooding the Internet. Other indigenous activists including Davi Kopenawa have received threats on their lives (BBC News 2014).
- 6 <http://www.albertojosevarela.com/>. Accessed May 31, 2016.
- 7 <http://www.ethnobotanicalcouncil.org/>. Accessed May 31, 2016

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