

Amazonian Vegetalismo: A study of the healing power of chants in Tarapoto, Peru.

François DEMANGE
Student Number: 0019893

M.A in Social Sciences by Independent Studies
University of East London, 2000-2002.

“The plant comes and talks to you, it teaches you to sing”
Don Solón T. Master *vegetalista*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter one: Research Setting.....	3
Chapter two: Shamanic chanting in the anthropological literature.....	17
Chapter three: Learning to communicate.....	38
Chapter four: Chanting.....	58
Chapter five: Awakening.....	77
Bibliography.....	89
Appendix 1: List of Key Questions	
Appendix 2: Diary	

Chapter one: Research Setting

1. Panorama:

This is a study of chanting as performed by a new type of healing shamans born from the mixing of Amazonian and Western practices in Peru. These new healers originate from various extractions, indigenous Amazonians, *mestizos* of mixed race, and foreigners, principally Europeans and North-Americans. They are known as *vegetalistas* and their practice is called *vegetalismo* due to the place they attribute to plants - or *vegetal* - in the working of human consciousness and healing rituals. The research for this study was conducted in the Tarapoto region, in the Peruvian highland tropical forest. It is based both on first hand information collected during a year of fieldwork and on my personal experience as a patient and as a trainee practitioner in *vegetalismo* during the last six years.

The key idea to be discussed in this study revolves around the *vegetalista* understanding that the taking of plants generates a process of learning to communicate with spirits and to awaken one's consciousness to a broader reality - both within the self and towards the outer world. Chanting is facilitated through the influence of plants. As Don Solón, one of my informants, clearly explains, the plants ... "teach you to sing". Chanting is seen as a manifestation of a process of consciousness awakening and communication with spirits. It is also conceived as the main tool through which healing takes place.

The thesis presents the core notions of *vegetalismo*, examines a selection of chants, and supports its conclusions on the basis of interviews with five *vegetalistas* of renown and a comparative analysis with the anthropological literature.

2. What took me to *vegetalismo*:

I first came to Peru in 1996 and approached *vegetalismo* guided by a quest to find a cure to a long-standing addiction to commercial drugs, especially heroine and cocaine. Whilst living in Colombia in 1995, and in the midst of a deadly race in substance abuse, I came across a paper by Jacques Mabit (1992), a French medical doctor who had develop an original method for the treatment of drug-addiction using Amazonian *vegetalista* plant-based shamanism. At that time, my condition was deteriorating rapidly and I had shortly escaped death after an accident induced by my using drugs. Having tried unsuccessfully several other detoxifying therapies, I was drawn to the novel approach developed by Mabit and I joined his rehabilitation centre of Takiwasi, created in 1992 in the city of Tarapoto. I joined as a patient but with the firm idea to continue as a trainee healer once I had improved from my illness. I had always been fascinated with Amazonian rituals and in my previous travels to several countries, I had gained some experience with Afro-Brazilian, Indian and Indonesian healing practices. I was convinced that shamanic healing with plants would give me both the healing I was looking for and a new direction for personal growth. After nine months of intense treatment I felt a clear improvement and I knew I had taken a right step towards definitively overcoming drug dependency. I left Takiwasi and continued my apprenticeship as a healer under the guidance of indigenous *vegetalista* healers belonging to various Amazonian cultural traditions.

After leaving Takiwasi, I realized that it had provided me with a solid background to continue my own apprenticeship with outside healers. It had helped me to bridge Western and indigenous healing practices and given me criteria to distinguish well-trained healers from charlatans. It had also taught me how to communicate with Amazonian people, especially how

to engage with their peculiar sense of humour, avoiding open confrontation and diffusing conflict through joking and the exchange of gifts and services. During the last five years I have regularly taken part in a variety of rituals and undertaken seven periods of retreat in solitude in the forest, under the guidance of *vegetalista* practitioners. I have become acquainted with around thirty different Amazonian plants used for healing, including the psychoactive plants *ayahuasca* (*Banisteropsis caapi*), *toe* (*Brugmansia*), and *tobacco* (*Nicotina tabacum*). Recently, I have started conducting ritual ceremonies, and I hope to further my own healing skills as part of a life engaging process of personal development. According to Freud (1960), the success of a psychological therapy should be measured in its practical outcome and impact upon the patient's life. The treatment is successful if after some time in therapy, the patient is able to work, love and engage in daily life with other human fellows. According to these criteria, my treatment by *vegetalismo* was successful. I have distanced myself from the destructive drive that took me close to death, and I have a lovely family and three children. Like other healers around the world, my recovery from illness strongly infused me with the desire and determination to become a healer myself.

3. Tarapoto and the Takiwasi Centre:

Tarapoto city lies on the eastern foothills of the Andes in a region of highland tropical forest. It is the commercial capital of the department of San Martin, an area known for its cattle, tobacco, sugar, corn, rice and coffee production. It has approximately 110,000 inhabitants and is continuously growing due to its important retailing activities.

Historically it has been a place of migration, social and cultural mixing, although deeply marked with social hierarchies. The majority of the local population are Lamista Quechua speakers of Chanca origin, whose ancestors came from the South of the country, near Cusco, before the arrival of the Spaniards in the XVI century. After the conquest, Europeans of different origins, Christians and Jews, added to the population pool. The result is an eclectic mixture of people, with an in-depth knowledge of the surrounding forest and a varying Judeo-Christian background. Deeply entrenched social hierarchies exist along side this cultural richness and plurality, creating a deep trench between those people with stronger indigenous links and those with stronger Western origins. Although the Lamista Quechua-speaking population displays a dynamic sense of identity and strong cultural resilience to domination, they are economically marginalized and generally confined to the rural areas and the poor neighbourhoods of the city. By contrast, the Spanish-speaking population occupies society's upper grades, and controls the busy commercial life of the region.

Like Tarapoto itself, the therapy centre of Takiwasi is the site of a novel intercultural mixing, cultural exchange and social differentiation. The majority of patients, usually heavy users of cocaine basic paste, are Peruvian Spanish-speakers from the region, the Capital Lima and

other urban centres. Only a few patients are foreigners, generally Europeans. After more than a decade of existence, Takiwasi has grown and has contributed to reshaping the face of *vegetalismo* in the region. The centre has modern installations that can accommodate a dozen patients at the time, and more than a hundred patients have been treated following its method. According to Mabit (1988, 1992, 1996), success rates of detoxifying therapy are good (Nakasawa 1996).

Mabit founded the rehabilitation centre together with his wife, Rosa Giove, a Peruvian medical doctor of Japanese extraction, and a multidisciplinary team that no longer exists. Mabit learnt previously the practice of *vegetalismo* from local Tarapoto Quechua speakers. His principal teacher was the well known Quechua healer Aquilino Chujandama.

The centre was founded around the idea to find a connection between *vegetalismo* and modern psychotherapy opening up to a new field of investigation and trying to establish a bridge between two traditions. Nevertheless, Mabit's views, strongly influenced by Western psychiatry and Judeo-Christianity and his attempt to keep control over the original team, have pushed away several of the therapists and healers who previously took an active part in his organisation. However, Takiwasi has contributed to creating an awareness of the therapeutic effects of *vegetalismo* healing amongst Westerners and within the medical profession. As a consequence, every year several dozens of foreigners and urban Peruvians visit Tarapoto with the intention of taking part in healing rituals, and some remain there as novices for various periods of apprenticeship. There is a growing market for international and national healing services and tourism in the region, especially addressed to tenants of New Age ideas in Europe and the United States (Dobkin de Rios 1995).

The relationship between Takiwasi and traditional healers or *vegetalistas* is also established through the employment of healers from different Amazonian cultural traditions and corners of Peruvian Amazon. Mabit performs some of the healing practices and rituals himself but from time to time healers like local Quechua Lamista, Aguaruna from the Northeast, Ashaninka or Shipibo from the central East region of the country lead rituals with plants. They all speak different indigenous languages, especially during rituals and in chants, but use Spanish as a *lingua franca*.

All these different healers recognize each other's skills and powers as shamans, but certain hierarchies exist as to who is more powerful, although this ranking is not fixed and is often reversible. The cultural encounters and exchanges, as well as the rivalries amongst Amazonian healers emerging around Takiwasi, are further complicated and enriched given the intellectual and personal backgrounds of the medical doctors and other foreigners involved.

The relationship between indigenous healers and Western novices is a delicate matter. Traditionally, Amazonian healers are not paid for their teaching. In the context of community life, shamanic knowledge is passed down within the kinship group as a means of perpetuating group history and identity (Belier 1986). With Westerners, by contrast, knowledge is often paid for either in money or other valuables, or in services. At each step, the exchange of knowledge for money, goods or services is negotiated between trainee and trainer. Given an appropriate contribution and the recognition of their tradition, healers are generally willing to share part of their knowledge with non-relatives and foreigners, and they see the expansion of *vegetalismo* positively.

Nevertheless, the question of economic income and status between foreigners and indigenous healers in Peru - a society ridden with race, culture and class differences - is problematic. Western foreigners and mestizos find themselves at the top of the social ladder in Peru, and indigenous people at the bottom of it. No matter how respected a knowledgeable master healer may be in the *vegetalista* circle, he inevitably finds himself in a lower social scale than his Western foreign apprentices. Their economic differences are sharply marked, as most foreign apprentices have an economic income far superior to that of their teacher shamans. Their living conditions also differ greatly, as most foreigners live in the best neighbourhoods of the city whilst indigenous healers live in the poorer areas or in the countryside. An indigenous healer's lifestyle and use of money is oriented towards the maintenance of kinship ties within the extended family and the consumption of selected commercial goods, such as medicine, clothes and commercial alcoholic drinks. Most healers manage to accumulate some capital from payments received for healing and training apprentices. They buy some land or build a house for family use, but their ties with kin in the countryside remain strong, and impose heavy economic demands upon them. Nevertheless, the economic difference between foreign apprentices and indigenous healers is reverted at the ritual level, and foreigners explicitly recognize their dependency upon their indigenous masters.

4. Fieldwork Procedures and informants:

I decided to undertake a research degree to examine in depth the issue of chanting amongst some of the healers I have got to know well after five years of apprenticeship. For me, fieldwork and personal experience are intimately linked. As Rosaldo (1989:47) has so convincingly argued, the full emotional and personal involvement of the researcher in the processes of social life is instrumental in reaching an understanding of cultural attitudes. I see myself both as a researcher and as an informant, standing in particular relationships towards the other informants of this study. My intention is to take seriously what *vegetalista* healers say about their experiences with plants and their relationship with spirits. Following Clifford Geertz (1983) and Edith Turner (1992), I aim to reach the “native point of view” and understand what it feels like and means to experience the working of spirits through chanting. I realize that I may have taken a risk of ‘going native’ and embracing the ideas and practices of *vegetalismo* as my own. Rather than a weakness, I see this as my strength and as a challenge. I aim to reach an analytical understanding of shamanic chanting from the richness of my experience of *vegetalismo*, rather than vice-versa. Through my own illness, recovery and apprenticeship, I have experienced the healing power of chants and the effects of plants upon my consciousness and awareness of self and reality. Yet, as a Westerner brought up in the Western intellectual tradition, I feel compelled to reconcile this experience with a more systematic analysis and the points of view at work amongst *vegetalista* healers.

I have used two main types of fieldwork procedures, participant observation and interviewing.

- Participant observation involved my direct participation in rituals and periods of preparation in isolation in order to further my direct experiential knowledge of the use

of plants and chanting by healers. I provide a day-to-day journal of my experience during one of this period of preparation in the appendix 2.

- Interviewing five main informants, all healers of renown whom I knew well from my previous apprenticeship experience. The list of questions for each interview is cited in the appendix 1.

The five informants I have chosen were all to a certain degree my teachers and I am indebted to them for the bestowal of their knowledge upon me. I have good relations with all of them and they all accepted willingly to collaborate with my study. Only one of them asked me not to diffuse his last name for personal reasons. They have different cultural backgrounds but they all call themselves *vegetalistas* and recognize each other's skills. They all know each other well and interact, exchanging information and occasionally attending to ritual healing sessions together.

Guillermo Arévalo.

Master *Vegetalista*

A 47-year-old Shipibo indigenous Peruvian, he currently lives in Pucallpa city but he visits Tarapoto regularly. The child of a renowned healer, he travelled through several Shipibo-Conibo communities, learning from their own healing practices. He also trained as a medical nurse in Brazil and his work combines both indigenous and Western approaches to medicine. He has been involved in several non-governmental projects, especially AMETRA (“Asociación de la Medicina Tradicional”), a program for the rescue of the use of traditional

medical plants in the Amazon. His chants have been recorded on CD and television productions and he is widely known in Peru as a master in the field.

Don Solón T.

Master *Vegetalista*

An 86 year old Peruvian of *mestizo* extraction and Spanish speaking background, he currently lives in the town of Iquitos but he visits Tarapoto regularly. He has worked occasionally for Takiwasi and has his own wide circle of both foreigners and Peruvian apprentices and patients.

Don Dionisio.

Healer *Vegetalista*

A 40 year old European, of French and Spanish extraction, he has a university degree in European literature and has been involved in healing training since 1987 in Iquitos and Tarapoto. After working several years for Takiwasi he created his own centre for personal development called Yacumaman in Tarapoto. He works principally with foreign patients.

Orlando Chujandama.

Healer *Vegetalista*

A 36 year old Peruvian Quechua Lamista, he is the grand son of a healer shaman of great renown who trained many of the current healers of the region. He works occasionally in Takiwasi and in Dioniso's Yacumaman centre. He works with both foreigners and Peruvian patients.

Rosa Giove.

Chanter in *vegetalista* rituals

A 49 year old Peruvian of mixed Spanish-speaking and Japanese extraction, she is a medical doctor and is married with Jacques Mabit, Takiwasi's founder. She has been involved in *vegetalismo* in Tarapoto since 1979. She has her own clinic opened to patients, where she combines Western medication with Amazonian plants.

There are a variety of interviewing techniques available in the anthropological methodology, some of which are based on focus groups, discussions and alternative participative methodologies (Silverman 2000). Nevertheless, given the specific characteristics of the topic of research, I consider that personal interviews, based on a pre-established list of questions, were the most appropriate technique to collect comparative data. I soon realized that each healer had his or her personal ideas about *vegetalismo* and that it was important to allow for such personal variations and interpretations to be transcribed in the study. *Vegetalismo* is not a unified dogma but a lived experience and practice. The interviews were conducted in an informal atmosphere where they were able to express themselves freely in the margin of the questions. All the interviews were carried out with the full consent of the informants.

Chapter two: Shamanic chanting in the anthropological literature

1. Music and trance:

The salient use of music in the ritual practice of religious trance and shamanism was identified by Eliade (1964:175, 180, 223). Chanting and drumming, in particular, are described as key musical techniques used by religious specialists to generate an altered state of consciousness and ecstatic experience usually associated with the establishment of a mystical communication between specialist and spirits. Similar ideas are put forward by Rouget (1980) in his study of the relationship between music and spirit possession. He argues that music is instrumental in the ritual preparation of religious apprentices and in the creation of an altered state of mind, during which communication with spirits is said to take place. People who are the most susceptible of being affected by the mind-altering influence of music and entering trance, are often those men and women who have undergone prolonged periods of illness and physical or social marginalisation (Lewis 1971). For instance, in male dominated societies, such as in the sub-Saharan region, women deprived of other recognized channels of expression for putting forward personal claims and distress, often resort to the call of the spirits to let off their personal and domestic problems in the public arena. There are different forms of trance. In some cases, spirits may enter the body of the specialists – as in most African spirit possession rituals – or, alternatively, spirits may be contacted by the specialist's soul in its 'flight' to the other world. This latter form is usually, but not exclusively, associated to Siberian and

indigenous American shamanism. In both cases, spirits are contacted and communicate with humans in and through music.

For instance, amongst Siberian Tungus religious specialists - from whom the word 'shaman' derives - drumming and chanting are essential to bring about a state of mystical connection with the spiritual entities inhabiting their mytho-cosmological universe. Similarly, amongst the Chuckchee North-Pacific Coast of America, Bogoras (1904) reports that: "The single means used by the Chuckchee shamans, novice or experienced, for communication with 'spirits', is the beating of the drum and singing..." (Bogoras 2001:56). The most important component of the lengthy training undertaken by novices consists in acquiring the apparently simple skill of drumming and chanting. Apprentices spent one of two years in isolation, eating little food and abstaining from animal fat and sweets. They practice drumming and singing until the spirits infuse them with the strength required to performing healing rituals. Shamans of renown are capable of providing sustained ritual acts, beating the drum and singing for hours without showing signs of fatigue. Their endurance is attributed to the active work of the spirits who are said to fill the performer with strength and to use the performer's body as a medium to sing and beat the drum. Thus, through the shaman's music, the spirits manifest themselves in this world to the surrounding audience in ritual settings. Musical performance is therefore conceived both as the means through which spirits are contacted and as a proof that the spirits are working through the medium of the performer.

2. Chanting, metaphor and spiritual transformation:

In tropical forest areas of Central and South America, however, drumming does not often play an important part in shamanic rituals. Sometimes rattles are used to mark the rhythm. Chanting, by contrast is absolutely crucial. Shamans are above all people who sing; and in various indigenous languages the terms for chanting, curing and contacting spirits are the same. For instance in Amazonian Peru, the Quechua term *icarar* – which is widely used amongst *vegetalista* healers – entails the inseparable ideas of chanting, calling the spirits and healing (Luna 1992). According to Olsen (1975), amongst the Warao of Venezuela, the identification between chanting and the spirits is so powerful, that the shaman is said to become the spirits about whom he sings. Rather than rituals of spirit possession as such, shamanic rituals are rituals of transformation, through which the chanter is transformed into a powerful spiritual being himself, capable of changing reality and undoing the illness and harm believed to have been caused through witchcraft. Shamans also transform themselves to be able to converse with the spirit ‘masters’ of animals and fish, thus securing the successful outcome of hunting and fishing expeditions. Shamans may as well transform themselves into the spirits of awesome animal predators, jaguars, bears and otters, and engage in ritual mystical battle with other similar spirits. Such transformations are hastened by chanting. Shamanic songs are said to contain the power to transform and heal people or bring about death through mystical means.

A similar idea is put forward by Overing (1990) with reference to the Piaroa of Amazonian Venezuela. She claims that through his singing the shaman re-creates the world based on an in-depth knowledge of mythical narratives and cosmology. The indigenous worldview rests

upon a theory of knowledge and agency alternative to Western scientific premises, but equally powerful as an explicative conceptual model of reality. A shaman chants the world into existence. In his singing he recounts mythical episodes describing the origin of things. He therefore enters another temporality, beyond the limits of daily time and material dimensions, and becomes a powerful being himself capable of bringing about reality, like other spiritual beings of their mythico-cosmological universe.

Following a same line of thought, Townsley (1993) argues that, amongst the Yaminahua of Peru, chants use a special language to recount the mythical foundations of reality. “Learning to be a shaman is learning to sing, to intone the powerful chanting rhythms, to carefully thread together verbal images couched in the abstruse metaphorical language of shamanic song, and to follow them...A song is a path – you make it straight and clean then you walk along.” Chants are ... “a shaman’s most highly prized possessions, the vehicles of his powers and the repositories of his knowledge” (Townsley 2001:267). What shamans do when they cure is sing, and the effectiveness of their healing power is thought to originate in their songs. Chants are perceived to have the power of transforming shamans into healers and transforming reality through their singing.

Townsley (2001:269) demonstrates that the words of Yaminahua chants have an analogical and figurative construction. They are ‘twisted’ words that are words which do not mean what they usually mean in daily life and have a hidden significance which needs to be decoded by the specialist. For instance, in chant language, fish are called ‘peccaries’, anacondas are ‘hammocks’ and jaguars are ‘baskets’. These associations are due to perceived similarities.

For instance, jaguars are called 'baskets' because the patterns drawn in the skins of jaguars resemble the patterns woven in baskets. Descola (1986) also show that amongst the Jivaro speaking Shuar and Aguaruna people of Ecuador and Peru, the metaphorical words of chants present a socialized conceptualisation of nature. Hunting preys are called 'brothers-in-law' and garden plants are called 'children'. This is particularly the case in shamanic chants performed to secure the positive outcome of livelihood activities. In the theory of knowledge underlying shamanic chants, the appropriation of natural resources is conceived in terms of social relations, and the animal or plant nature of preys and crops is substituted for kinship relationships.

According to Townsley (2001:270), it is crucial that in chanting things should not be called with normal daily words. As a Yaminahua shaman explains, using normal words would cause him to 'crash' into things. By contrast, with 'twisted' words he can 'circle' around things and 'see them clearly'. Metaphorical language is needed to open up to a wider vision of reality which is instrumental for its mystical manipulation. Townsley argues that the metaphorical construction of chants is directly linked to the visions which accompany the chanting. 'Twisted words' are meant to create images uttered in the songs, so that they may be visualized by the singer in an inner state of consciousness. Chanting metaphors about the visualization of images is a key feature of Amazonian shamanism.

3. Auditory to visual synaesthesia:

Such a blending of the senses – in this case the fusion of auditory and visual fields - is known as synaesthesia, and is essential to Amazonian shamanism. Synaesthesia is a cognitive phenomenon of cross-modal perception – colours are heard and tunes are seen as lights and shapes; smells are touched and surfaces are tasted; perfumes are visualised in figures and colours; and light is felt as texture. Synaesthesia is a type of sensorial experience that forms part of the neuro-psychological development of the brain and central nervous system. Generally, such fusion of the senses is spontaneously encountered in children, but it is rarely found spontaneously amongst adults (Shanon 2002:11). As individuals grow older, they seem to lose the ability to perceive in a synaesthetic manner. Amazonian peoples have found culturally specific ways of inducing such a rich perception in adults.

Amongst many Amazonian groups, synaesthesia is brought about through a combination of chanting and the use of psychoactive plants. In some cases, however, the bringing about of synaesthesia and the complex sensorial experience of shamanic rituals, do not depend upon the taking of plants. Amongst the Yaminahua, for example, very experienced shamans (Townesley 2001:267) use chanting alone to induce visions as a form of pure trance, not as a result of a chemically active natural substance. Amongst the Warao (Olsen 1975), chanting and the production of visions never involves psychoactive of any kind, not even tobacco. Music alone is the tool used to alter a shaman's consciousness.

However, in most of the sub-Andean Amazonian region - including the forested area of Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia - the use of psychoactive plants is generally highly

ritualised. The main psychoactive plants regularly used include several varieties of the following species: *Banisteriopsis Caapi*, *Brugmancia*, *Virola*, *Brunfelsia*, *Erythroxylon coca* and *Nicotiana tabacum*. *Banisteriopsis*, locally known as *ayahuasca*, *yagé* or *caapi*, is particularly well known for its synaesthetic properties and it is one of the most widely used plants of the shamanic repertoire in the sub-Andean region. Its preparation and uses vary from one cultural group to the other. Usually, the bark is boiled in water and prepared in a beverage in combination with the leaves of other plants, *Diplopterys cabrerana* and *Psychotria viridis* plants, usually known as *chagropanga* and *chacrana*, respectively (see Schultes 1992:24-30). The beverage is boiled for several hours depending on the concentration desired, and other plants may also be added to vary the strength and effects of the brew. The variety of ingredients and recipes used for ayahuasca brewing is a reflection of the impressive ethno botanical knowledge detained by Amazonian people (Davis 1995). The beverage is generally taken at night, in the darkness.

Chemically, the ayahuasca is a unique pharmacological composed product associating *Banisteriopsis Caapi* which contains essentially the *harmaline* alkaloid and *Psychotria Viridis*, which leaves contain *Dimethyltryptamine* or *DMT*. The *harmaline* inhibitor of *mono-amine oxidase* (MAO) blocks the latter's distribution. However, it is in fact an enzyme produced by the human body, which decomposes the hallucinogen substance *DMT* before it goes to the central nervous system. It is thanks to the combination of these two substances that the brew can stimulate the senses and provoke visions (for more details see Strassman: 1994, 1996, 2001; Spinella: 2001 and Naranjo: 1979, 1987).

Auditory-to-visual synaesthesia is an extremely common effect of *ayahuasca*, as well as some other psychoactive plants used by shamans. Under the influence of *ayahuasca* consciousness is altered to create a flux between sound and vision, concept and light. Smell and touch are also intensified, so that under the influence of the beverage, the person feels the encompassing embrace of a complex and flowing web of unified sensorial experiences always in the move. According to Shanon (2002:11)...“music determines the rhythm and movement of figures in visions as well as the rate of change between images. Thus the circles of light one commonly see when intoxicated often pulsate to the rhythm of the singing one hears and are coordinated with the movement of one’s body”. The metaphoric ‘twisted words’ of shamanic chants contribute to the translation of sounds into visions by providing images of reality which are then perceived as figures, moving shapes, lights and colours. The synaesthetic effects of the plant is well known to Amazonian people, as is made clear in the following myth about the origin of *ayahuasca* (called *yagé*) quoted by Shanon (2002:12). The mythic narrative belongs to the Quechua speaker Kamsa and Inga people of southern Colombia.

“At the beginning earth was obscurity. Men already existed, but they lacked intelligence. They took *yagé* and parted in a half. For the women it gave menstruation, for the men the piece grew up and up to the sky. Little by little the shadows took on shape and form and the silhouettes got details. In the sky, they saw *yagé* entering an immense flower. It got fecundated and transformed into the sun. And from there came the people of the sun with their distinct music played on flutes and drums. Each melody transformed into a distinct colour. When they arrived to the earth they gave it colour, and when the world was illuminated, played the symphony of colour and the music awakened the comprehension of people, creating

intelligence and language. This is why *yagé* is used: with it the world is seen as it is, and intelligence expands making everything clear and harmonious with the spirit of the cure”.

This account explicitly relates the taking of *ayahuasca* (*yagé*) to the differentiation between the male and female genders, and their respective fields of action. It also endows music with a divine origin and describes how divine music gave place to colour and light, hence bringing about a colourful world into existence for humans to inhabit. For the divinities, who infused the world with the power of the sun, music is colour and light is sound. By taking *ayahuasca*, people came to experience the divine unity of hearing and seeing, and thus accessed a superior unified perception and intelligence, which is also understood to be the source of all healing.

4. Cosmic knowledge and menstruation:

Ayahuasca creates the human genders by giving them different capabilities: women are given menstruation, men are given the ability to travel to the realm of the divinities. Thus, in its origin both menstruation and shamanism are born from *ayahuasca*. Both are complementary but also exclusive of one another. In practice, amongst most cultural groups, women do not take *ayahuasca* on a regular basis until they reach the menopause. Younger women may take *ayahuasca* only as long as they are not actually menstruating. In general, it is understood that during their menses, women should refrain from taking *ayahuasca* or having contact with men who take *ayahuasca* – which in traditional communities generally includes the majority of the male population, since most males take part regularly in community *ayahuasca* drinking sessions. Thus, shamanism is defined in contradistinction and complementarity to menstruation (Hugh-Jones 1979).

This idea echoes the analysis developed by Knight (1991) concerning the place of menstruation in the constitution of human society at a cross-cultural and evolutionary level. According to Knight, humankind cultural evolution is rooted in motherhood and reproduction and encapsulated in the female menstrual cycle. Mythical narratives and rituals reproduce in performances the creative potency of menstruation. In male dominated societies, male rituals appropriate such a creativity and deny women's part in it. This is the case for instance, for the Rainbow Serpent rituals of Australian aboriginal societies (Knight 1991: 451). Amongst most *ayahuasca* drinking societies in The Amazon, women's creativity is not denied by men, but it constitutes a domain from which men are excluded because of a perceived exclusivity between *ayahuasca* taking and menstruation. After the menopause, such an exclusivity is lifted, and

women and men may both pursue the development of shamanism. Gender relations vary considerably amongst different Amazonian groups, and in some cases, it can be markedly hierarchical. Male rituals in Amazonian, like in Australia, do parallel to a certain extent female reproductive symbolism as demonstrated by the Hugh-Jones (1979) study of Barasana rituals in Colombia. Nevertheless, *ayahuasca* cannot be seen as an element unilaterally enhancing male supremacy, since the tone of gender relations amongst *ayahuasca* taking societies is relatively egalitarian in comparison to the non drinkers of *ayahuasca* speaking groups of Central Brazil, like the Mehinaku, who also have many male rituals mimicking menstruation (Gregor 1985).

The theme of the rainbow serpent, however, is also very important amongst *ayahuasca* cultures. The spirit of *ayahuasca*, or its 'mother' as it is commonly called (Chaumeil 1983; Luna 2001:228) is said to be a giant anaconda snake. This is meant to be a superior being, which detains great knowledge and power over consciousness. It is the active representation of *ayahuasca*, its animated and intelligent core. The serpent being of the spirit of *ayahuasca* is related to the fact that under the synaesthetic effect of the beverage, things are often seen as though through the veil of a snake's skin. One of the first compelling visions brought about by the beverage, is the sight of gigantic, moving snake, with colourful scales flowing and changing constantly. People from different cultural extractions, including indigenous Amazonian and foreigners have reported a similar psychoactive experience. Shamans say that if one sees such as snakes it means that the 'mother' of *ayahuasca* has agreed to reveal itself and welcomes the apprentice. In his book entitled *The Cosmic Serpent*, Narby (1995) argues that the snake-like features of *ayahuasca* visions reveal an even deeper connection with

another hidden snake-like structure, our DNA. According to this author's personal and eclectic views, the experience and knowledge acquired through the taking of ayahuasca would connect humankind to the very sources of its organic existence.

5. The effectiveness of chanting:

The idea that *ayahuasca* may actually provide a means of developing new forms of health therapies and reaching a wealth of unexplored knowledge to Westerners has gained great popularity in the current New Age movement. Shamanic tourism is on the increase, especially around Amazonian urban centres, and many charlatans – usually Westerners posing as shamans - are taking economic and psychological advantage of eager newcomers (Dobkin de Rios 1994). At the same time, new age movements are contributing to push the boundaries of what are considered acceptable and effective healing practices, and they have brought to the front the examination of the healing power of music. Current studies focus in particular on the effect of harmonic sounds used in therapy. A wide body of evidence has been collected in support of the idea that melody, tonality, rhythm and vibration may effectively interact with both mind and physical processes, contributing to improve health amongst patients with a variety of psychosomatic conditions. The study of the melodic and rhythmic components of Amazonian shamanic chants is beginning to attract the attention of researchers, but to date, the majority of the studies about the effectiveness of Amazonian healing therapies focus upon the words of the chants rather than upon their musical properties.

Levi-Strauss' (1949) study of the effectiveness of symbolism is one of the first attempts by anthropologists to take serious account of the healing effects of chanting and explain why chanting works. Levi-Strauss takes the case of a difficult delivery amongst the tropical forest Cuna people of Panama. He agrees that the shaman's chanting has a direct physical impact upon the positive outcome of the delivery. The chant, transcribed by the author, recounts the ritual battle between the shaman's soul and evil animal spirits, which are said to have taken

possession of the woman's womb, obstructing the delivery. Through his chanting, the shaman tells his ritual battle against the spirits and his final victory upon them. Levi-Strauss observed that the chanting is effective, especially in this particular case, since after the completion of the chants, the woman did deliver a healthy baby. Levi-Strauss likens chanting to Western psychoanalysis and its effect to the psycho-somatic healing of psychotherapy. Both psychoanalysis and shamanic chants are verbal therapies and operate upon a mythological basis. Psychotherapy is founded upon the Oedipal myth and chants upon Amazonian myths. In both cases, the therapy consists in making explicit a situation and rendering acceptable the pains, which patients refuse to tolerate because they have no means of making sense of their suffering. When their pain is put in the words of a mythical story, patients can finally understand their suffering. Such a process of comprehension activated in the telling of one's experience using a mythical grid is so powerful that it produces the physical relief of the symptoms and underlying psychosomatic condition causing the pain.

Like in psychotherapy, Levi-Strauss suggests that there is no mystical agency at work in shamanic healing. Ultimately, patients heal themselves because they understand the meaning of the words of the chants and recognize themselves through them. The mental act of comprehension of spoken narratives is key to his approach to healing. This is, however, an unusual situation in Amazonian shamanism. According to Townsley (2001:269), for instance, amongst the Yaminahua of Peru: "Many shamanic songs are almost totally incomprehensible to all but other shamans". Most Yaminahua can barely understand their meaning because of the densely metaphoric analogies build up in the songs. The important thing emphasized by shamans is that the words of the chants should not be literal but figurative and generate a

visionary experience during trance. “It is in this visionary experience that the magical efficacy of the song is thought to lie. The song is the path, which he (the shaman) both makes and follows. It sustains and directs his vision. Whether or not the patient can understand the song is irrelevant to its effectiveness as far as he is concerned...”(Townesley 2001:270). According to this approach, healing resides in the unique blending of sound and sight that is generated in synaesthesia.

Shanon (2002) also suggests that the effectivity of healing resides in the metaphoric images of chants and the synaesthetic experience of the healer, since metaphor and synaesthesia are intimately linked. Synaesthesia is the sensory-perceptual counterpart of metaphor. Usually, in Amazonian shamanism, synaesthesia contained in shamanic metaphors is triggered by taking plants, although in some cases it may be achieved through chanting alone. Patients may also chant and take plants as part of the healing ritual, and they may also have a synaesthetic experience. In these cases patients find themselves in the position of apprentices, even if only for the duration of the ritual, and healing performances involve to a certain extent the initiation of the patient into the practice of shamanism. Nevertheless, in many cases patients are not given plants and synaesthesia applies only to the healer. In order to understand the internal efficacy of shamanic chanting, it is necessary to leave aside Western ideas about communication and speech therapies. As Townesley (2001:271) argues: “From this standpoint, not even the often mentioned idea of ‘illocutionary force’, or any speech act or narrative which changes the world by redefining it or changing people’s perception of it, could possibly encompass the sheer physicality of the transformations claimed by shamanism”.

6. Conclusion:

Few academics, apart Luna (1986), have provided a detailed description and analytical account of Peruvian *vegetalismo* and the anthropological literature on this specific topic is very limited. As I mentioned in the introduction, my study focuses on two main aspects of *vegetalismo*. Firstly, the use of plants by specialists as a vehicle to establish contact with the spiritual world; and secondly, the use of chants as a therapeutical tools, which are said to be gifted to shamans by spirits during special ritual conditions.

A review of the cross-cultural literature on shamanism reveals that music and chanting are a key elements used to establish communication with the spiritual world or create a state of trance (see: Eliade 1964, Rouget 1980). In Amazonia, in particular, music and chanting are instrumental to the shaman's ritual transformation into a powerful spiritual being (see: Olsen 1975, Overing 1990) and chants are used as a therapeutical tools (see: Townsley 2201, Levi-Strauss 1949). Often chanting takes place during ritual sessions involving the taking of plant beverages, especially hallucinogens (Reichel Dolmatoff 1975, Luna 1984, 1986, Townsley 2001, Narby 1995, Dobkin de Rios 1975, Shanon 2002), but this is not always the case (Levi-Strauss 1949). However, the use of plants, and in particular hallucinogens, is widespread in Amazonian (see: Schultes 1992). In order to understand plant-based shamanism is it therefore necessary to describe how plants are used, especially *ayahuasca*, which is one of the most important plants used in the sub-Andean Amazonian region (see: Naranjo, 1975, Narby 1995, Schultes 1992, Strassman 1994, 1996, 2001 and Spinella 2001). A review of the literature reveals that *ayahuasca* is associated to core indigenous Amazonian ideas about cosmovision, gender relations and taboos (see: Knight, 1991, Narby, 1995).

The number of academic researchers who have personally experienced the efficacy of shamanic rituals and who argue in favour of understanding the efficacy of shamanic rituals in their own terms is growing (Shepard 1998; Kalweit 1987; Descola 2000; Barbira Freedman 2000; Taussig 2000; Luna 2001). This is also what I intent to do in the following chapters of this thesis, as I examine in depth the ideas put forward by Peruvian *vegetalistas* about plants and their ritual use.

Chapter three: Learning to communicate

1. Teacher plants:

The core notion underlying *vegetalismo* is the idea that plants are animated superior intelligent beings and, given certain conditions, they teach and bestow healing powers upon people. In particular, plants teach people how to chant. For this reason, plants are called ‘*maestras*’ or ‘*doctores*’, meaning that they are supreme knowledgeable ‘teachers’ (Luna 1984). It is understood that the animated essence of a plant resides in its ‘mother’, that is, its generative principle and superior agency. “The ‘mother’ of a plant is its essence, its life” (Luna 2001:229). Teacher plants include all Amazonian psychoactive plants but also many others plants, both wild and cultivated, which may or may not be recognized in Western ethno botanic science for their medical or mind-altering properties. There are more than a hundred plants commonly used by *vegetalistas* around Tarapoto. Mostly all plants, both wild and cultivated, if not all plants, are said to have a ‘mother’ and they may teach people under certain ritual conditions. In general, however, well-known teacher plants are those plants that cause some form of ‘dizziness’, dreams or visions when taken in beverages, inhaled or smoked. Dizziness - called ‘*mareación*’ - is seen as the direct effect of the plants, and it is in the visions or dreams provoked under the influence of the plants that the practitioner may be in contact with the plant’s ‘mother’ or its spirit.

The practitioners of *vegetalismo* aim to become ritually acquainted with many plants - as many plants as they are led to know throughout their career. They do this in order to become receptive to the teaching of the plants’ “mothers” and learn to sing their chants.

It is understood that as a practitioner becomes acquainted with plants, he learns to communicate with their 'mothers' and with other spirits. The 'mothers' of plants and the other spirits thus contacted are said to bestow all sort of knowledge upon the practitioner, including knowledge concerning crops, prey and as the use of medicinal plants. The most important form of knowledge gifted by the spirits is encapsulated in chants. These chants, known as *Icaros*, are meant to be powerful healing tools containing the transformative strength of the spirits. Chants are both the gift of the spirits and the key to the knowledge and power of transformation said to reside in the spiritual realm.

2. Dieting: Retreat and preparation

In order to become receptive to the teaching of the ‘mother’ of plants and awakening to the spirits, the apprentice must undergo several periods of isolation in a hut in the forest and drink large amounts of plant beverages. During these periods of isolation, which may vary from a few days to several months, or even years, he should avoid taking animal fats, alcohol, salt, peppers and sweet tasting foods. His food consists principally of boiled or roasted green plantains. He is meant to ‘diet’ (*dietar*) one or several plants by ingesting beverages made with parts of the plant he is aiming to become acquainted with. The dieter is looked after by a knowledgeable *vegetalista*, especially when he is a novice. His food is cooked and taken to him on a daily basis. More experienced practitioners may diet in complete isolation and without supervision. Generally, the inexperienced apprentice starts dieting short periods of time, with plants which do not induce too strong dizziness effects but which have some recognized properties, such as cleansing the digestive system or fortifying eyesight and hearing. Many plants are also meant to contribute to a more acute perception and awareness of the forest flora and fauna, so that the apprentice may improve his hunting skills. The apprentice spends the day resting, meditating, observing his surroundings and taking plants. He should not expose himself to direct sunlight or cold water, because it is understood that these could shock him and weaken him. Soap, perfumes and scented fragrances should also be avoided so as not to confuse and dilute the effect of the plants taken. Often the plant beverages act as purgatives causing vomiting and defecation. Dieting with plants is also meant to bring about vivid dreams, which the apprentice should recall to meditate upon while awake. The idea is that throughout his dieting, the apprentice cleanses himself of all impurities that are said to impair the development of his physical, psychic and spiritual life. Progressively, he

loses his human smell and acquires the scent of the plant he is taking. He actively becomes plant-like, thus allowing the “mothers” of the plants to manifest themselves and bestow their teaching upon him. Such moments of spiritual teaching occur generally in dreams, but they may also take place in a deep meditative state. In some cases, the dieter may ‘receive’ a chant from the ‘mother’ of a plant. This may happen either in dreams or during a time of meditation.

After completing a period of dieting, the apprentice must abstain from animals, sweets, alcohol and sexual relations for a period at least twice as long as the period of dieting. The post diet is understood to be the time during which the plants taken during the dieting period fully enter and settle in the body and self of the apprentice. It is therefore very important to protect oneself. It is understood that eating animal fats, sweets, alcohol and having sexual relationships, would cut short the working of the plants. Similarly, sexual intercourse would entail an exposure to the sexual energy of another person, which could rob the apprentice of all his newly acquired knowledge. Only after a secure period of post-diet can the apprentice resume normal life.

I have personally undertaken seven periods of dieting during the last five years. The last diet was carried out in March 2001 as part of my participant-observation fieldwork for this study during which I undertook a period of 21 days dieting under the supervision of Don Edinson Ijuma, a Quechua Lamista healer in the Curuyacu village, along the Huallaga River (see appendix 2).

3. Apprentice, patient and experienced *vegetalista* master:

As I have mentioned, according to the *vegetalista* view, knowledge, spiritual healing skills and chants are principally acquired directly from the plants during the process of dieting plants in periods of isolation. The relationship between novice and experienced *vegetalista* is also important, but in general it is understood that an experienced practitioner acts a supervisor and a guide to his apprentice. The experienced practitioner is meant to look after the novice through his dreams and through other rituals of protection and transmission of spiritual powers. For instance, he may suggest which plants the apprentice should diet with and for how long. Nevertheless, it is said that the real source of guidance is not the tutor himself but the spirits, who manifest themselves to the practitioner in dreams in order to provide information as to what should the apprentice do and which plants he should diet. Spirits also provide guidance during deep meditative states and during rituals involving the use of *tobacco* and the drinking of psychoactive plants, especially *ayahuasca*.

Tobacco is a very important plant for *vegetalistas* and it is used in the ritual of ‘*soplada*’ meaning ‘breath’ or ‘blowing’. The practitioner blows his breath mixed with *tobacco* smoke upon his apprentices and patients in order to spray his protection upon them. The healer also uses different types of perfumes or cinnamon (*sacha canela*) to spray his apprentices and patients with his spiritual protection. As he smokes tobacco, the practitioner may enter a meditative state during which guidance from the spirits may be bestowed.

Ayahuasca taking rituals are also equally important in the relationship between experienced practitioner and apprentice. Furthermore, *ayahuasca* rituals are often referred to as the principals rituals occasions during which chants are received from the spirits.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the fact that according to *vegetalistas*, the real work of becoming acquainted and receptive to plants and spirits takes place during the period of dieting with plants – including both psychoactive and non-psychoactive plants - in isolation in the forest. In other words, periods of dieting are a necessary preparation for someone truly committed to *vegetalismo*. Attending to *ayahuasca* rituals alone will not take the apprentice very far.

Ayahuasca sessions take place at night. Generally they start around 9:00 PM and go on through the night until dawn. The audience sits informally in a circle around a leading practitioner. Some women take part in the sessions, especially foreigners. Indigenous women generally do not take *ayahuasca* during their reproductive age, but they may attend the ritual if they are in need of healing. No fire is lit. The leader ‘invites’ and serves *ayahuasca* to the people attending the session. First, he chants upon the beverage, blows tobacco smoke and breath in it a few times and sings one or two chants meant to call the “mother” of *ayahuasca* and open the session. When he finishes, he calls each of the participants one by one and serves them some *ayahuasca* using the same glass. Then he serves himself a dose and drinks it. Generally, all the attendant members take a drink, but sometimes, when people are too ill or weak, they do not have *ayahuasca*. Ill people may sit through the ritual in order to be “seen” and healed by the leading practitioner. After drinking the beverage, the leader waits for a while and then, he starts singing chant after chant to lead the ceremony and guide the participants. After an hour or more, he may invite people for a second round of drinking. As the effect of the drink and the chants become stronger, people in the audience feel the effect of the plant or the “mareación”, improve visions and are under the synaesthesia effect of the

plant. Some may feel nauseous and vomit. This is regarded as a positive outcome because *ayahuasca* is meant to be a purgative. Vomiting is seen as a sign that *ayahuasca* is working on the person, cleansing him. Often, vomiting comes when the state of ‘dizziness’ is at its strongest, that is when the effect of *ayahuasca* is strongly acting and visions are very powerfully experienced. When a person vomits strongly, the leader of the ceremony may approach him and blow some *tobacco* smoke or perfume on him, perform a special chant to help him, guide his visions or to calm him down. As *vegetalistas* explain: “*La purga misma te enseña*” (The purgative itself teaches you), referring to the fact that the visions are a form of transmission of knowledge from the plant, complementary to the visions, ideas and chants brought about by the beverage. Therefore, the synaesthetic effect of *ayahuasca* entails a crucial purgative aspect, and hearing, seeing and cleansing are all intimately linked.

Usually, after one or two hours, the leader performs a chant ritual for each of the participants: This is the time for the “*soplada*”. To put down the effect of the plant and protect or cure each participant, he calls them to sit in front of him one by one, then he sings a special chant for each person and each time he blows tobacco or scented water upon them, on the crown of their heads (corona), their chest, their back, and their hands. When he has finished with everyone, the leader continues chanting until he closes the session. It is understood that the chants have a powerful healing effect.

During the *ayahuasca* session, the people who take the drink both learn from the plants and are healed by them. The leading singer is the medium through whom communication with the spirits is facilitated. Learning and healing are somehow inseparable. Through his chant, the

leader contributes to generating or orienting visions in the audience, so that each person may have a direct and personal experience. At the same time, it is understood that, under the action of the plant, the leader can 'see' in his visions what is happening to each member of the audience. He can 'see' whether they are ill or not, what kind of illness they have, and what kind of treatment would be the most suited for them. For instance, he may 'see' that a member of the attendance has a tumour and he may recommend taking some Amazonian anti-inflammatory medicinal plants or even going to a Western doctor for an operation. The leading practitioner can also 'see' whether someone should engage in a process of apprenticeship and what kind of plants he should diet. Then under the guidance of the spirits, the leader receive orientation about what kind of chant he may intone to resolve the personal problematic of a person.

Therefore, it is understood that the 'mother' of *ayahuasca* manifests itself to knowledgeable practitioners to provide information about other plants which should be taken by members of the attendance, either because they are ill, or because they wish to proceed in the path of learning more from the plants. In other words, plants 'teach' about other plants and how to use them.

4. Types of specialists:

Vegetalismo is marked by a strong healing ethic and discourse. Practitioners define themselves as healers and they explicitly present their work and the relationship with their patients and apprentices in terms of healing. Nevertheless, like all shamans in The Amazon (Chaumeil 1983; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975; Harner 1968), *vegetalistas* are also ambivalent characters; and their shamanic skills entail both healing and killing through mystical means. Their spiritual powers can be used to foster either life or death depending on the intentions of the practitioner. As Barbira Freedman (2000) explains, at present, *vegetalistas* are attempting to release themselves from ancient shamanic ritual wars and strife rooted in traditional enmities between specialists belonging to different territorial and cultural groups, and develop a more psychic approach based on a Judaeo-Christian view of good and evil. During the colonial period, the Catholic Church devilized shamanism, making all practitioners into sorcerers. In order to escape from this dark image and find ways of legitimacy, many practitioners emphasize their healing powers by incorporating Christian icons, and they state their detachment from sorcery and shamanic wars. Nevertheless, these continue to be an important element of *vegetalistas'* powers and their transmission from master to apprentice.

The ambivalence of the practice is particularly evident in the main imagery of shamanic weaponry. A shaman's powers – which he can use either for healing or for killing – are called his '*virotos*' or 'darts'. These magical darts are said to be lodged in the back of the neck and along the spinal cord of the practitioner. The shaman's power or primal force is also conceived to be a sort of phlegm that the practitioner holds in his stomach the "yachay". The apprentice receives parts of this phlegm from his master, who regurgitates some and gives it to the

apprentice to eat. He also gets darts during periods of dieting. After such a period of dieting specific plants, it is crucial that the practitioner protects his darts from unwanted interference with other people. It is thought that during the post-diet, the darts are particularly unstable and may be affected by the energy of other people. The newly acquired darts may disappear if post-diet restrictions are not respected. Thus depleted of his powers, it is said that the practitioner's spinal cord becomes 'twisted' and his back crooked.

Although all the *vegetalistas* I have met have claimed to be '*curanderos*', which means 'healers', people around them differentiate them according to two main aspects. Firstly, according to their reputation, which varies depending on whether people around them perceive them to be healers or sorcerers (Chaumeil 1983). Secondly, according to how capable they are perceived to be at establishing communication with the spiritual world. A specialist of great renown is called a "bench" (*banco*), because it is said that during shamanic sessions, the spirits come and sit on his back and shoulders, as if he were a bench. (see : Chaumeil 1983, Luna 1984, 1986). This classification would take us into an area beyond the scope of this study.

A classification is also by the *vegetalistas* themselves. This classification is based on the use of the most important plants of their practice. The following categories of practitioners are found:

- *Paleros* (from '*palo*' meaning 'tree') specialize in the work with forest barks. They prepare complex beverages made of combinations of forest barks and use them for dieting in isolation. They are capable of diagnosing certain illnesses and conditions through dreams and meditative states induced by the use of their beverages.

- *Tabaqueros* specialise in the ceremonial drinking of beverages or inhaling powders made with tobacco. They are capable of diagnosing illnesses and some conditions through dreams and meditative states induce through the use of tobacco.
- *Ayahuasqueros* specialise in the ceremonial drinking of *ayahuasca*. They serve *ayahuasca* during ritual drinking ceremonies and are able to diagnose serious illnesses under the influence of *ayahuasca*.
- *Toeeros* specialise in the ceremonial drinking and dieting with *toe*. This very powerful psychoactive plant is meant to contribute actively in the preparation of a good *vegetalista*. Very few specialist drink *toe* for its specific effects are particularly strong and dangerous.

This classification takes into account only the most common plants used in *vegetalismo*. Sometimes, other plants are also included to extent the classification, but this is not relevant to our study. It is important to highlight the fact that this classification is not exclusive. A “*palero*” can also be an “*ayahuasquero*” or a “*toeero*” and a “*toeero*” can also be a “*tabaquero*” . Nevertheless, each specialization requires a specific preparation that is based on a specific diet. If a healer wants to wider his knowledge of a specific plant, he needs to diet this plant with the help of a shaman tutor who also has a good knowledge of the plant in question. Therefore, one aspect shared in common by all the different plant specialists is the fact that they all need to undergo periods of preparation and ritual dieting with plants, but they may chose to diet different plants.

Another aspect shared in common by all the specialists is the fact that they all have chants or “Ikaros”. It is said that the process of learning “ikaros” is the same for all the specialists and it is through their relationship with the spiritual world that they all receive their “ikaros”. Therefore, all the specialists are linked to the same knowledge derived from the spiritual world of the plants, they undergo similar processes of preparation, dieting plants, receiving chants and using the knowledge thus acquired for therapeutical purposes. Given the importance of dieting, specialists recognize themselves as *vegetalistas* and rank themselves in function of the times and length of the periods of diets carried out, the type of plants they have dieted and the number of “ikaros” they have in their “repertoire”.

The three main ranking criteria used by specialists are therefore as follows:

- Length of practice.
- Periods of dieting in isolation.
- Reception of chants from the spirits.

Using the same criteria, the five main informants of my study are ranked as follows:

R. Giove

Dionisio

O. Chujandama

T. Solón

G. Arévalo

5. How chants are received:

All chants originate from the spirits, but some more directly so than others. There are different types of chants according to the process of their reception by the practitioners:

- Chants learnt by the apprentice from his master:

This type of chant is memorized by the apprentice, but, it is thought that in order to become efficient, the chant must be placed ritually by the master into the body of the apprentice. The ritual transfer of the chant is done by the teacher blowing tobacco smoke on the apprentice's back, so that the chant may become engraved in his spinal cord together with his darts.

- Intuitive chant:

This type of chant is the result of periods of dieting in isolation during which the apprentice develops his sensitivity, intuition and musical creativity. The apprentice creates his own tunes spontaneously, improvising on the musical conventions shared within the *vegetalista* indigenous musical background.

- Chants directly gifted by the spirits:

According to my informants, the spiritual origin of these chants is experienced vividly by the receiver. This can happen during dreams, during periods of dieting or during ayahuasca sessions.

Given the fact that the moment of reception of chants forms part of the personal experience of the healers, it is important to take personal variations and opinions into account. I present here the variety of experiences reported by the 5 main informants of my study.

Orlando Chujandama reported receiving a chant during a period of dieting in isolation in the forest, but he only realized it entirely during an *ayahuasca* session after he completed the diet. “During my diet I could hear the melody of someone singing”, he said, but he did not make an effort to remember it or focus on it. When he finished the diet, he took part in an *ayahuasca* ceremony. “I was at the *ayahuasca* ceremony and came out of the house. Suddenly, I felt something coming close to me singing a melody. I needed to sing it myself too. It was as though I was listening to a record and I just could not help but sing along it”.

And throughout, he explains that when he started singing along, the melody and the words came to him together. At first, when he started singing, he did not understand the purpose of the chant he received, but singing for a while he understood. The chant came with a vision. As he started to sing, the chant materialized itself in the image of a dragon and as he continued to sing, the vision showed how the people taking part in the *ayahuasca* ritual were being healed by the dragon. Since then, he has used several times his chant to heal people. He understands that when he chants upon someone, the same spirit of the healing dragon he saw becomes activated, thus healing the person for whom he is singing. He is convinced that chants are a gift of the spirits and that such a gift cannot be provoked by humans. The chant came by itself with the melody, the rhythm and the words all together. There was no need to memorize them. He received this chant in Quechua, the language of his cultural group.

Rosa Giove reported receiving a chant during an *ayahuasca* ritual. “In the *ayahuasca* session, I had images with a musical background. They were images woven together in a melody. Everything was pushing me to reproduce the song I was perceiving”. Later on she undertook

a short cleansing diet in isolation in the forest. She was not intending to prepare herself for becoming a healer but only taking a short detoxifying diet. “During the diet, I felt someone singing behind my back. At first, I tried to push the feeling away, as though it was a fantasy of mine. But the singing came back repeatedly in various occasions until I knew well the chant and I accepted it”. She received chants in Spanish. According to her, the language of the chants does not make a big difference to the spiritual origin of the chant because it all comes together, melody, rhythm and words and there is no need to memorize them.

Guillermo Arévalo received his chants during periods of dieting in isolation to develop healing skills. According to him, chants arise from a variety of sources, such as personal inspiration, teacher plants, spirits of the forests, and cultural traditions. He received all his chants in his native Shipibo language. He considers that proper chants could not be in mere everyday language. There are specific

shamanic languages to be used during singing rituals. “For me, the chants came in parts. First I received the words, which I memorized and learnt to understand their meaning and purpose. Then, I completed the melody and rhythm with my own creativity”. He also added some whistles and the blowing of breath and an internal chant, similar to an internal prayer. He said that all chants came with their visions, some were meant to be chants for opening up ayahuasca sessions, others to be healing chants. He also considers that chants come by themselves and that the practitioner is taken by an urge to sing which goes beyond himself.

All my informants received a chant, or various chants, to be used for a specific purpose, and they all received their chants under the effects of plants, such as the *ayahuasca*, or other plants ingested during dieting in isolation. My informants are convinced that these chants are truly the manifestation of the spirits and that they are a gift of the spirits to be used therapeutically in protection and healing rituals.

6. Conclusion:

In this chapter, I have presented the main ideas of *vegetalismo* as I understand them after 6 years of personal practice and as my informants described them to me during fieldwork. As I have mentioned in my introduction, one of the main ideas to be discussed in this work is the fact that *vegetalistas* understand that the taking of certain types of plants in specific conditions, generates a process of learning to communicate with spirits and awaking one's consciousness to a broader reality. Eduardo Luna, (1984), is the first anthropologist to have describe the plants as "teachers" and described the learning relationship practitioner have with nature, through which and information is received from plants during rituals. The taking of plants, whether it is *ayahuasca* or other master plants during diets, facilitates such a communication. Chanting is seen as a manifestation of a process of consciousness awakening and communication with spirits. It is also conceived as the main tool trough which healing takes place.

Chapter four: Chanting

In this chapter I transcribe and examine five chants used amongst *vegetalistas*. Each chant has a specific purpose and they were selected in order to illustrate some of the most common ailments and ritual conditions treated in *vegetalismo*.

In the last chapter, we argued that the *ayahuasca* is a key plant to *vegetalismo*. I have therefore initiated my analysis with two chants, each in a different local language, used to ritually start *ayahuasca* taking ceremonies. The third chant, illustrates *vegetalismo* healing techniques associated to a culturally specific ailment, called ‘*susto*’ or ‘fright’, and which is said to affect particularly young children.

The two last chants are ritual protection chants, a concept key to *vegetalismo* preventive healing and dieting techniques. An apprentice needs to be particularly well ritually protected after completing a period dieting in isolation and slowly returning to normal life. Certain foods and sexual intercourse, for instance, are taboo during the periods of dieting, and in order to eat those foods again and reinitiates his sexual life, the apprentice needs to be given appropriate ritual protection. One of the chants, is used to protect the practitioner specifically against the potential harm and loss of power caused by of sexual intercourse after a period of dieting. The last chant is associated to the key *vegetalista* concept of “*Arkanear*”, which means to protect oneself and others against witchcraft, negative spiritual influence, negative energies or harmful spirits and “*brujos*” or sorcerers. As we saw in chapter three (page 48), Chaumeil (1983) shows that the distinction between healers and sorcerers is crucial to Amazonian

shamanism, because major and fatal diseases are understood to be brought about by sorcerers who send them onto their victims. *Vegetalista* share a similar witchcraft-based idea of disease. Healers explain that in order to heal a patient from the diseases sent by sorcerers, they have to spiritually confront the sorcerer and engage in a spiritual fight during *ayahuasca* sessions (Barbira Freedman, 2000). I could not collect a song describing the spiritual battle between healer and sorcerer, but the last song is an example of “*arkana*” protection against witchcraft generally used by healers as preventive spiritual healing.

First chant: Chant to start an *ayahuasca* session.

Nuye nuye nuye si Warmisita kaya muni

Come, come little woman, I call you

Nuye nuye nuye si Warmisita kaya muni

Come, come little woman, I call you

Remolino jukumanta sawayanga, sawayanga

On top, on top of the depth of the whirlpool

Remolino jukumanta sawayanga, sawayanga

On top, on top of the depth of the whirlpool

Ay... nanana nay..., nay nay nay nay...

Ay...nanana nay..., nanay nanay...

Ay... nanana nay..., nay nay nay nay...

Ay...nanana nay..., nanay nanay...

*Tray...nana nana nana nana nana naynay... nanay nanay...*Tray... nana nana nana nana nana
nanay..., nanay nanay...

*Tray...nana nana nana nana nana naynay... nanay nanay...*Tray... nana nana nana nana nana
nanay..., nanay nanay...

Cumaseba chungunmanta kichimbito

From the heart of the Cumaseba is the pipe

Yana yana tabakunsito shinawarmi

Black black little tobacco like the woman

*Canoa jukumantay, pukumushon pukumushon*From the center of the canoo they will blow
on you, they will blow on you

Ay... nanana nay..., nay nay nay nay...

Ay...nanana nay..., nanay nanay...

Ay... nanana nay..., nay nay nay nay...

Ay...nanana nay..., nanay nanay...

Tray...nana nana nana nana nana naynay... nanay nanay...

Tray... nana nana nana nana nana nanay...,
nanay nanay...

Tray...nana nana nana nana nana naynay... nanay nanay...

Tray... nana nana nana nana nana nanay...,
nanay nanay...

Anacta napuri mushon, napuri mushon

On the above you will walk, you will walk

Tchajamanta tingun mushon enemigo runay

In this way you will find the enemy man

Ay... nanana nay..., nanay nanay...

Ay...nanana nay..., nanay nanay...

Ay... nanana nay..., nay nay nay nay...

Ay...nanana nay..., nanay nanay...

Tray...nana nana nana nana nana naynay... nanay nanay...

Tray... nana nana nana nana nana nanay...,
nanay nanay...

Tray...nana nana nana nana nana naynay... nanay nanay...

Tray... nana nana nana nana nana nanay...,
nanay nanay...

This chant in Quechua was sung by Orlando Chujandama. He learnt it from his grandfather, who in turn had learnt it from his own master. The latter is said to have received the chant directly from the spirits. This chant, therefore, has a genealogy of transmission that legitimates its use by successive generations of healers. The meaning the chant needs to be interpreted because it uses metaphorical or ‘twisted words’, following the expression coined by Townsley

(1993). Orlando decoded the metaphoric meaning of the words for me, thus allowing me to see through the rich shamanic imagery.

The woman mentioned in the first line is the “mother” of *ayahuasca*. The image of *ayahuasca* as a woman is a well-known visionary effect of the psychoactive plant and it is understood as a sign that the plant is working and the spirits are coming. Usually, *ayahuasca* appears under the shape of a half-plant half-human woman. In the following lines, the healer calls upon the energy of the river. He calls from within the depth of the river, the internal whirlpool where the force of moving water resides. This force is directly linked to the power of *ayahuasca*. The psychoactive effect of the beverage is associated to the whirlpool’s force, which is the heart of the river flow. Through this imagery, the healer is connecting with a powerful force that takes him and the other attendants to the ceremony to the most intense and deepest experience, as if they were being dragged into the heart of a whirlpool.

The following lines repeat the same sound so as to create an impression, to allow the words of the song to sink in the ritual context, take their place and become effective.

In the following lines, the healer calls the *cumaseba* tree, which is generally used to make smoking pipes because it has a very strong wood. *Cumaseba* trees are known to survive even the strongest hurricanes. By calling upon this tree, the healer invokes its strength. He then sprays this strength upon the attendants to the ceremony, so that they may experience the power of *ayahuasca* in its full strength, like a whirlpool, but remain protected by the force of

the *cumaseba* tree that never breaks down. According to Orlando Chujandama, the energy of the *cumaseba* fertilizes the body of the participants to the ritual.

In the following line, the chant calls the spirit of *tobacco* in order to protect and blow smoke upon the participants to the ceremony. When *tobacco* smoke is used in rituals, it is usually for the sake of protection. The black colour of *tobacco* is associated with the colour of the *ayahuasca* plant. By mentioning the similarity of colour, the healer mixes the forces of *tobacco* and *ayahuasca*. He is calling the spirits of both plants to protect and cure the participants during the ritual.

The following lines refer to a point in the experience with *ayahuasca* when the participants are fully navigating in the psychoactive trip, like a canoe navigates on a river. On the canoe, the participants can cross the river to reach the other shore, which metaphorically refers to the unseen dimension of reality. Whilst the participants cross towards the other world, *tobacco* smoke is blown upon them to protect them. After this, a sequence of sounds is repeated to allow the words of the chant to sink in the ritual context and become effective.

The last set of lines describes how the participants have reached the highest point of their experience. *Ayahuasca* has taken them to the top, from where they are allowed to see the enemy who is their own fear or their own shadow. The *ayahuasca* experience culminates when one faces up to one's own inner self and inner fears, and when one learns to meet oneself.

The chant closes with a repetition of sounds to allow once again, for the words of the chant to become effective.

Second chant:: Chant to start an ayahuasca session.*Madre ayahuasca*

Mother ayahuasca

Llévame hacia el sol

Take me to the sun

De las sabias de la tierra hazme beber

From the soul of the earth make me drink

Llévame contigo hacia el sol

Take me with you to the sun

Del sol interior hacia arriba

From the inner sun to the above

Hacia arriba subiré, hacia arriba subiré, madre

To the above I will climb, to the above I will climb, mother

Háblame, Usame, enséñame

Talk to me, use me, teach me

Enséñame a ver

Teach me how to see

A ver mas allá, madre

To see beyond, mother

A ver el hombre dentro del hombre

To see the man within the man

A ver el sol dentro y fuera del hombre

To see the sun inside and outside man

Enséñame a ver, madre

Teach me how to see, mother

Usa mi cuerpo hazme brillar

Use my body, make me shine

Usa mi cuerpo hazme brillar

Use my body, make me shine

Con brillo de estrella con calor de sol

With the spark of the stars, with the warmth
of the sun

Con luz de luna y fuerza de tierra

With moon light and the strength of the earth

Con luz de luna y calor de sol, madre

With moon light and the warmth of the sun

Madre ayahuasca

Mother ayahuasca

Llévame hacia el sol

Take me to the sun

This chant was received by Rosa Giove in Spanish. Both the melody and the words differ greatly from the previous chants. The music and rhythm have similarities with songs played at the catholic mass, and the words do not have the metaphoric ‘twisted’ construction of indigenous Amazonian shamanic chants. Despite its clear Western origin, this chant is accepted by *vegetalista* healers of indigenous extraction. Rosa Giove explained that the chant is a means of requesting permission to the *ayahuasca* plant in order to carry out a drinking ceremony and to bring about a positive outcome.

Unlike the previous chant, this chant does not derive its imagery from specific elements of the Amazonian flora and fauna. In general the song has a more literal construction and the few images used belong to Western views of powerful elements of the landscape, the sun and the moon. Nevertheless, the song also encapsulates an eclectic combination of Western and Amazonian ideas in the notion of ‘mother *ayahuasca*’. It is uncertain whether this refers to the

‘mother’ of the plant in indigenous terms of the ‘mother *ayahuasca*’ as a benevolent mother figure, somehow similar to the Virgin Mary.

The song also makes reference to a more psychological approach to the inner self. The *ayahuasca* experience is referred to as a process of introspection, an aspect which is also described by indigenous healers but coated in a more metaphorical imagery of protection, strength and travelling, as shown in the previous chant.

Third chant: Chant to heal children with ‘fright’.

Paparuy paparuy, paparuy paparuy

Paparuy bird

Paaaparuy, paaaparuy, paaaparuy

Waruruy waruruy, waruruy, waruruy

Waruruy seed

Waaaruruy, waaaruruy, waaaruruy

Otorongo wawahi

Offspring of the tiger

Shina puri kungui wawahi

You are walking like the offspring of the tiger

Ywawahi kawawahi ywawahi

Look at me, look at me, look at me

Tibirungui wawahi

Offspring of the tibe bird

Shina puri kungui wawahi

You are walking like the offspring of the tibe bird

Ywawahi kawawahi ywawahi

Look at me, look at me, look at me

Lluwitchilluy wawayhi

Offspring of the deer

Shina puri kungui waway

You are walking like the offspring of the deer

Ywawahi kawawahi ywawahi

Look at me look at me, look at me

This chant was received in Quechua by Orlando's grandfather and passed down to Orlando. This chant is used during 'blowing' ceremonies with *tobacco* to heal children 'frightened', restless, tearful and fearful.

The chant invokes different animals and plants from the natural environment. The *paparu* is a small bird with a peculiar capacity for survival. As a chick it often remains alone without the protection of its mother. Nevertheless, it manages to remain without harm. The *wayruru* is a red and black seed, very hard, used locally to protect newborns from spiritual harm. The *otorongo* is the jaguar, the major predator of the forest. In combat with other animals of the forest, it is generally the winner. The *tibe* is a bird like the *paparu*, self reliant and capable of surviving on its own. Finally, the deer is a very fast animal, which escapes easily the attack of predators. All these animals and plants are mentioned because of their extraordinary endurance and capacity of survival in hard conditions. The chant calls upon all these spirits in order to concentrate their extraordinary strength and pass it onto the young child who needs protection and healing. As in the first song decoded by Orlando, the imagery of the fauna and flora derive from an in-depth observation of animal and plant species in the natural surrounding forest.

Fourth chant: Chant for protecting a dieter who is about to resume having sexual relations:

Imalaya jetayuc chara kangui

What kind of lips do you have?

Buru shina jetayuc chara kangui

Like donkey lips

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Jé jé...

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has to give me back my dart, hé hé

Paiche shina asnayuc chara kangui

Like the smell of the paiche fish you have

Paiche shina asnayuc chara kangui

Like the smell of the paiche fish you have

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Jé jé

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has to give me back my dart, hé hé

Yawarachi shina asnayuc chara kangui

Like the smell of the yawarachi fish you have

Yawarachi shina asnayuc chara kangui

Like the smell of the yawarachi fish you have

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Jé jé

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has to give me back my dart, hé hé

Imalaya barbayuc chara kangui

What kind of beard you have?

Yana hilo karete shina barbayuc chara kangui

Like the black sowing thread you have

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Jé jé

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has to give me back my dart, hé hé

Wikungo shina barbayuc chara kangui

You beard is like the wikungo tree

Wikungo shina barbayuc chara kangui

You beard is like the wikungo tree

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Jé jé

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has to give me back my dart, hé hé

Aychalla kiruyuc chara kangui

All your teeth are fleshy

Aychalla kiruyuc chara kangui

All your teeth are fleshy

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Jé jé

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has to give me back my dart, hé hé

Llausa shucuc chara kangui

You are going to make yourself suck phlegm

Llausa shucuc chara kangui

You are going to make yourself suck phlegm

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, hé hé

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has to give me back my dart, hé hé

Puka umachara yaycu shungui

The red head you are going to put inside

Puka umachara yaycu shungui

The red head you are going to put inside

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, hé hé

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has to give me back my dart, hé hé

Puka uma chara sati pungui

You will put the red head inside

Puka uma chara sati pungui

You will put the red head inside

Chaylla kutichim birutinita, Chaylla kutichim birutinita, hé hé

Just this has to give me back my dart, Just this has
to give me back my dart, hé hé

This chant was received in Quechua by Orlando Chujandama's grandfather. It is used to protect somehow who has undergone a period of dieting in isolation and who is about to re-establish sexual relationships after completion of a period of post-diet abstinence.

The chant has a strong metaphorical construction and its 'twisted words' need to be decoded to be understood. The chant provides a series of images of the different parts of the genitalia of women, sexual intercourse and sexual arousal. The idea is that through the chant, the body of the dieter is prepared to meet women's genitalia, to become aroused and engage in sexual intercourse in a safe manner, without risking losing the powers, darts and energies acquired during the period of dieting.

The images used to describe women's genitalia are considered slightly comical by Orlando Chujandama. The labia are compared to a donkey's lips with a strong fishy smell and her pubic hair is likened to the fibbers of the *wikungo* tree. By making fun of a woman's genitalia, the chant deactivates the potential dangers and weapons hidden in them. In particular, the reference to the genitalia's 'teeth' being 'fleshy', that is being unable to bite, reveal that the

vagina is conceived as a mouth which has lost its sharp teeth and is rendered safe for sexual intercourse. The references to the woman's 'phlegm' are an indication of a woman's lubrication and sexual arousal. Similarly, the 'read head' is the tip of the penis. The song describes in images both the act of penetration and the act of being penetrated, and it bestows ritual protection upon both.

After each sentence a key verse is repeated: "Just this has to give me back my dart". Orlando Chujandama explained that the dart refer to the powers received by the dieter from the spirits of the plants. By repeating the verse each time after a new description of an aspect of the genitalia and sexual intercourse, the chant is insuring that the dieter's power, that is his darts, will not be taken away from him when he engages in sexual intercourse.

Chant five: Protection ‘arkana’ chant:

<i>Urkututu Mamasita,</i>	Mother urkututu bird
<i>Shamui Namui shamui Namui</i>	Come here come here
<i>Urkututu Mamasita,</i>	Mother urkututu bird
<i>Shamui Namui shamui Namui</i>	Come here come here
<i>Ñuka Namui Kaya Muyke,</i>	I am calling you now
<i>Shamui Naki Pana Maya</i>	So that you may come
<i>Ravia Kushpa Shamun Naya,</i>	Displeased you come
<i>Piña Kushpa Shamun Naya</i>	Against you will you come
<i>Bigan Shipi Tiya Rimuy,</i>	Sit in our beams
<i>Kumban Tchipi Tiya Rimuy</i>	Sit on our roof
<i>Imaj Nate Tchaski Kungui,</i>	As you are going to receive
<i>Chitanero Wish Tchu Nanta</i>	What wishes throw away
<i>Shimi Kiwan Tchaski Kungui</i>	With your mouth you are going to receive it
<i>Tipitipi Rurach Paka</i>	Turning it into pieces you will throw it
<i>Karotaya Wishchukunguiya,</i>	Far away you will throw it
<i>Nanay nanay nanay nanay nay nay</i>	Nanay nanay nanay nanay nay nay

This chant was received in Quechua by Orlando's grandfather. It is an 'arkana' chant, that is a chant of protection against witchcraft, and it is used to protect the apprentice after completion of a period of dieting in isolation.

Like the previous chants in Quechua described here, this chant draws upon a rich imagery derived from a sustained observation of the natural habits of animal and plant species. Its metaphorical meaning was decoded by Orlando Chujandama. The *urkututu* is an Amazonian owl. It is said to be a very good flyer which travels from tree top to tree top. Nothing ever happen to it. It is a night time bird and it hunts its prey in the dark. Because of its skilful flying, hunting and night vision it is considered a powerful protecting spirit. Healers call it as an ally to alert them of any danger. The bird's cry let healers know when danger is coming. When healers call the bird's spirit, they use it to cleanse the dieter as well as the place where the *ayahuasca* ceremony is held. The bird's spirit takes away all the bad energies in its mouth and throws them away, as it is said in the chant.

6. conclusion:

It is through the use of plants that *vegetalistas* increase their faculty of perception of their own environment and establish a special relationship with nature, animals and the spiritual world. The chants, which according to my informants, are received directly from the spirits during rituals, are in their view a demonstration of the reality of such the relationship between spirits and practitioners. As mentioned in the introduction, these chants are held to be the main tool through which healing takes place. The description and interpretation of five selected chants show us how the forces of protection are invoked, and how the ritual cleansing and healing of patients is carried out in the ritual through chants. It is during the ritual, under the effect of *ayahuasca* that the practitioner is allowed to “see” in his visions the particular effect of the chant in the patient. Each chant has a specific purpose and, to a certain extent, it could be compared with a specific remedy to be applied to cure a specific illness in a patient. This is how practitioner understand their use of “Ikaros”, as a manifestation of the spirits and a demonstration of the effectiveness of *vegetalismo* as a technique based upon use of nature to generate a process of learning from the environment and to awaken one’s consciousness to a broader reality.

Chapter five: Awakening

1. Why do chants cure?

The question of the efficacy of chanting remains open and needs to be addressed. Amongst *vegetalista* healers, like amongst other types of shamans in the Amazon, chanting is absolutely crucial to the performance of healing rituals and to establishing communication with spirits. But why is it so? Why do chants heal? Is this due to the words of chants or to their musical qualities? Or, is this due to the sound-to-vision synaesthetic effects chants generate? Or, is this due to the spiritual powers intrinsically contained in chants? And if so, how do plants contribute to chanting and healing? More specifically, do plants really teach people how to sing and how to cure?

This is certainly what most indigenous Amazonian *vegetalistas* understand, including three of my main informants, Don Solón T., Orlando Chujandama and Guillermo Arévalo, although they each hold slightly different views. According to Don Solón, it is the plants by themselves ‘who’ show you what has to be done and what chants are to be sung during healing rituals. Literally, he is convinced that chants are gifts from the plants and encapsulate their wisdom and health giving strength. The healer becomes a bridge, capturing and transmitting the power of the plants. After chanting he is able to diagnose the disease or condition of the patient, and recommend the use of other medicinal plants to be taken by the patients to complete the cure. He considers that there are three types of chants according to their specific purpose, cleansing, healing and bestowing protection. To his eyes, the patients’ health improvement after treatment with chants is the living proof of their irrefutable therapeutic effect.

Orlando Chujandama considers that a healer is someone who has acquired in his body the force of the plants that he has ingested during repeated periods of dieting. Chants come to the healer during healing rituals and make him see and tackle the problem at work in the patient. He says that after chanting for a patient, he can feel clearly an improvement in the body of the patient. He thinks that the words of the chants are very important because words are intrinsically linked to the spiritual powers called upon by the healer, and they bear a direct relationship with the disease of the patient. He believes that it is fine to use a chant received from the spirits by another healer, as long as one has experience in the taking of appropriate plants and undergoing adequate periods of dieting. Through dieting, the healer becomes sensitive to the effects of plants, like someone who actually receives the gift of a chant from the plants. Nevertheless, only cleansing and healing chants can be learnt by memory from a master. Protection chants, by contrast, called 'arcanas' like the last chant analysed in the previous chapter, should be ritually passed on and 'placed' along the spinal cord body of the healer by his master, as explained in the third chapter.

According to Guillermo Arévalo, plants bring about an opening of consciousness in the healer and this enables him to see what happens inside a patient. He can then apply all sorts of chants, whether these are chants learnt from a teacher, chants derived from personal intuition or chants received from the spirits. Personally, he possessed chants learnt through these three varieties of transmission. For instance, if a patient with flu comes to see him, he takes *ayahuasca* and visualizes what is going on in the patient. He sees whether the patient's flu is due to cold, water or heat, he explains. Intuitively, given his open state of consciousness, he

understands and sees the shape of the illness and he also sees its cause. Once he knows the cause, he performs a chant appropriate to bring about healing. He considers that the words of the chants are very important because they enable the healer to call the specific curing elements needed for a specific illness. Words vary according to the illness treated. It is possible to use a chant received from the spirits by another healer as long as an appropriate period of dieting has been undertaken to prepare oneself. Then, chants keep their strength, as when they are sung by the person who received them originally. He explains that it is not indispensable to know the origin of a chant for it to remain efficient, but it is essential to know what one is singing about and for which purpose.

Although they may vary in detail and in degree of articulation and elaboration, local indigenous *vegetalistas* stress the spiritual origin of chants and their direct connection to plants, in as much as, according to them, chants are received and activated as a result of dieting with plants. By contrast, *vegetalistas* of foreign extraction see things differently and they hold more dispersed views, stressing an energetical and psychological approach.

According to Rosa Giove, who has received several chants although she does not regard herself as a healer, illness is the result of an energetic unbalance in the body. Chants are a key to stimulate the body to regain a state of harmony and balance. Chants remove the physical, emotions and energetic load from the patient. Since she trained as a medical doctor, she had to go through a process of accepting and reconciling herself with the idea that chants were efficient means of healing through music. Concerning the words of the chants, she does not know for sure whether these are fundamental or dispensable. She says that words have a direction and a meaning, and it is important to respect them and keep them as they have been

received. There are, however, chants that do not have words. They are purely rhythm and vibration and work on patients at a purely energetic musical level. She believes that it is acceptable to use chants received by another person as long as this person agrees, and that a similar purpose is kept in using the chants.

Dionisio, the only person not to have received a chant personally, chants per se is not the key to the healing process. He explains that it is the fact of being inspired and in a wider state of consciousness that enables oneself to visualize, vibrate and feel what is happening in the body of the patient and his environment. When one touches an internal source of inspiration, one knows exactly what to do, and chants appear to one's awareness to be sung and to re-establish a state of harmony within the patient, thus contributing to his or her improvement. According to his interpretation, the words of the chants are not important per se. They are only a semantic result, he explains. They can be used as elements to suggest and therefore contribute to induce a cure in the patient, since someone under suggestion is more open to receiving the benefiting effects of chanting than someone who is not under such a suggestion. The most important aspect of chants is the rhythm and the vibration. He says that a chant is fed with the energy of the healer and words appear according to the vision the healer has, depending on the specific cure which needs to be undertaken. Therefore, the words of the chants change together with the visions. There is no need to hang on to a rigid pattern of words. Since he has not received any chants himself, he always uses chants learnt from other healers. He explains, however, that the knowledge and chants learnt from a teacher must be personalized by the apprentice in as much as the apprentice needs to interpret the chants with his own frequency and energy. It does not matter whether one knows who first received a chant. *Ayahuasca* and other master

plants, he claims, are beyond the individuality of any given healer. They are part of the history of humanity.

2. Spirits or harmonious vibration?

The ideas put forward by indigenous local *vegetalistas*, although varied, do corroborate Townsley's (1993) approach on the importance of 'twisted words' and their elaborated metaphorical constructions based upon a detailed observation of the fauna and flora of the surrounding forest. Nevertheless, according to indigenous healers, the words of chants are not 'twisted' solely for the sake of producing certain types of visions in a synaesthetic effect, as discussed by Shannon (2002). Healers are fully aware of the link between chants and visions, and they do acknowledge a connection between the metaphoric construction of the words of the chants and visualization. However, their interpretation goes beyond a mere synaesthetic effect. According to them, the words of chants are 'twisted' because they originate from and address powerful spirits. They were given by the spirits and are used to call upon them and to activate their strength. Whether the patients and the attendants to healing rituals do understand the words of the chants or not, it does not matter. In this sense, Townsley's rejection of Levi-Strauss's (1949) speech-based approach to shamanic healing is appropriate. Healing is not induced in the patient through a psychological act of story telling and comprehension of one's suffering in terms of a pre-established grid of interpretation. It is not the words of the chants per se that cure. Words call the spirits, and the spirits cure, whether or not those words are understood by the patient. Nevertheless, the words of chants are not spells, which utterance would immediately produce the required effect. Chants are only efficient when performed by someone who has undergone repeated periods of dieting with plants and is therefore personally acquainted with the plants, their 'mothers' and other spirits. Ultimately, indigenous *vegetalista's* views are firmly on the side of the wisdom of plants and the reality of spirits.

By contrast, foreign *vegetalistas* do not place such an emphasis upon the words but rather upon the musical resonance of chants. Their views have some similarity with that of Goldman (1996) and other tenants of the healing power of music. Ultimately, it is the accordance in resonance between healer and patient, through chanting, which brings about healing. In order to reach such a level of perception of one's own and other people's energetic levels and vibration, one has to be in a state of 'open consciousness', as they explain. That is, one has to be inspired or in touch with one's intuition. Such a state of openness is achieved through the taking of plants, in the case of *vegetalismo*, but they consider that it may also be achieved through other practices, such as Buddhist meditation, for instance. *Vegetalismo*, dieting and the ritual taking of plants is one form, but not the only one, to achieving a state of openness and becoming tuned to one's own and other people's vibrations and internal energetic balance.

According to my informants, through the use of plants, each of them underwent a personal process of consciousness awakening to a broader reality, which in turn allowed them to gain access to chants to be used for specific healing and protection purposes.

3. Theory revisited:

What makes *vegetalismo* a distinct shamanic practice cross-culturally (Eliade 1964), is the use of plants enabling the practitioner to receive information from the spiritual world, and especially, to receive chants to be used to cure. Levi-Strauss' (1949) study of the effectiveness of shamanic healing amongst the Kuna is the one of the first attempts by anthropologists to take serious account of the healing effects of chanting and explain why chanting works. This author suggests that there is no mystical agency at work in shamanic healing. Townsley (2001), also analyses the effectiveness of chanting, amongst indigenous Amazonians. He demonstrates that what shamans do when they cure is sing, and the effectiveness of their healing power is thought to originate in their songs. In *vegetalismo*, it is also clear that chants are conceived as the manifestation of a mystical relationship established between the practitioner and the spiritual world (Luna, 1986), and their effectiveness is associated to their spiritual origin.

Although, many researchers in shamanism develop an 'outsider's' analysis and do not involve themselves in the rituals, there is a growing interest from academics to provide an account of shamanism from within (Shepard 1998; Kalweit 1987; Descola 2000; Barbira Freedman 2000; Taussig 2000; Luna 2001). This is what I have attempted to do by combining participating observing with my own personal experiences as a patient and an apprentice in *vegetalismo*.

My research is also marked by the fact that my informants have a multi-cultural background. Most of all the literature on Amazonian shamanism refers to indigenous communities or mixed extract population (Métraux 1944, Reichel Dolmatoff 1975, Chaumeil 1983, Luna

1984, 1986, 1992). Nevertheless nowadays there is an important movement of Westerners involved in Amazonian medicine, learning the practice (Dobkin de Rios 1995) and integrating their own perceptions and cultural views within it. Two of my informants are foreigners to Amazonian Peru, and myself a westerner, I have become part of this new movement through my own illness and apprenticeship. All my informants, foreigners and locals, belong to a local, national and international network of healers where foreigners and locals mix. Their *vegetalismo* is therefore a lively modern expression of Amazonian shamanism and a unique example of how an ancient-plant based Amazonian heritage is becoming integrated within wider international currents of trends and ideas.

4. Where I stand:

When I undertook this research I had several years of experience as a patient with shamanic chants, and I had felt their healing effect personally. I had learnt by heart several chants in Spanish and in Quechua. I loved their melodies and rhythm but I had never attempted to decipher their significance. In particular, as part of this study and with the help of Orlando Chujandama, I finally became aware of the coded metaphorical meaning of several of my favourite chants in Quechua. It had a true sense of discovery, first because it was the first time I had them translated from Quechua to Spanish, and second because I had not imagined that they contained such beautiful and creative imagery. Now that I know their meaning, I find them even more beautiful and remarkable than before. Nevertheless, I know from personal experience, that their healing effect upon me was not dependent upon my understanding their meaning.

During the period of dieting I undertook in March 2001 as part of this study (see appendix 2), I was hoping to experience personally the gift of a chant in order to be able to incorporate this experience in this thesis and analyzed it. But it did not happen. Nevertheless, I have experienced singing other people's chants during healing rituals and I know how certain chants feel appropriate to be sung in certain moments of the ceremony. From this study, my determination to continue my apprenticeship under the guidance of knowledgeable indigenous *vegetalistas* and undertaking new and more prolonged periods of dieting with plants has grown stronger. Like every other *vegetalista* practitioner my views are at the same time partly derived from what I have learnt from other practitioners, and partly personal, derived from my own experience. In my case, this study has helped me to gain a comparative approach and

situate *vegetalista* chanting within a wider theoretical framework. There is not dogma in *vegetalismo*, everyone holds slightly idiosyncratic views. That is part of the dynamism of the practice. For this reason I have presented the nuances of views put forward by five healers of renown, rather than trying to present a hermetically consistent body of knowledge.

My conclusions as to the effect of plants and the use of chanting in *vegetalismo* are an expression of my own process of learning. To me, *vegetalismo* is a means of learning to communicate with the spiritual realm, that is, with the energy contained in people, nature and the cosmos. It is a path towards an internal awakening. Plants are a tool to achieve such an awakening, and chanting is the outcome of such an awakening. “When the pupil is ready the master appears”, this is what I have learnt from my *vegetalista* teachers and from my personal experience. The plants are the masters who take the pupil through a process of learning to wake him up internally to a wider communication with the self and with the outer reality. Chanting is the expression that such a broadening of awareness has taken place. Nevertheless, I believe that there are other forms of achieving such a transformation and that *vegetalismo* and the use of plants is but one of the culturally specific techniques available for spiritual awakening, which is universal and not limited to a specific culture, language or historical moment. Other forms, such as Buddhist meditation and chanting are also valid and may achieve similar results through other means. The specificity and beauty of *vegetalismo* is that it shows how to communicate with nature, with plants and through plants. Plants wake up in each of us a universal awareness of communication with the environment and the world. Plants contain the power of the spirit.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arévalo Valera G., 1986, “El Ayahuasca y el curandero Shipibo-Conibo del Ucayali (Perú)” *América Indígena* XLVI, 147-161.

Barbira Freedman F., 2000, “The Jaguar who Would Not Say Her Prayers”, in *The Ayahuasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon’s Sacred Vine*, Luna E. and White S. eds., Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, pp. 113-119.

Belier, I., 1986, “Los cantos Maï Huna del Yagé” *América Indígena* XLVI, 129-145.

Bogoras W., 1904, *The Chuckchee*, American Museum of Natural History.

Bogoras W., 2001, Doomed to Inspiration, in *Shamans through Time: 500 Years on the Path to Knowledge*, Narby J. and Huxley F. eds., London: Thames and Hudson.

Chaumeil, J-P., 1983, Voir Savoir, Pouvoir, Le chamanisme chez les Yagua de l’Amazonie péruvienne. Genève, Georg Editeur.

Davis W., 1995, Ethnobotany: An Old Practice, a New Discipline, in *Ethnobotany: Evolution of a Discipline*, Schultes R. and von Reis S. eds., New York: Chapman and Hall.

Descola P., 1986, *La Nature Domestique: Symbolism et Praxis dans l’Ecologie des Achuar*. Paris: Editions des Sciences de L’Homme.

Descola P., 2000, The Spears of Twilight: Life and Death in the Amazon Jungle (excerpt), in *The Ayahuasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon’s Sacred Vine*, Luna E. and White S. eds., Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, pp. 102-104.

Dobkin de Rios M. and Katz F., 1975, Some Relationships Between Music and Hallucinogenic Ritual: The Jungle Gym on Consciousness, in *Ethos* 3(1), pp. 64-76.

Dobkin de Rios M., 1995, Drug Tourism in the Amazon, in *Newsletter of the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness*, vol. 5(1), pp. 16-19.

Eliade M., 1964, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Pantheon Books.

Freud S., 1960 (1901), *The Psychopathology of Everyday life*. Standart Edition, Vol. 6, London: Hogarth Press.

Geertz C., 1983, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books.

Gregor T., 1985, *Anxious Pleasures: The Sexual Lives of an Amazonian People*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Goldman J., 1996, *Healing Sounds*, Boston.

Harner M., 1968, The Sound of Rushing Water, in *Natural History*, vol. 77 (6), pp. 60-61.

Hill J., 1992, A Musical Aesthetic of Ritual Curing in the Northwest Amazon, in: *Portals of Power: Shamanism in South America*, Langdon J. and Baer G. eds, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, pp. 175-210.

THE ABOVE IS THE LAST CORRECTION---

Hugh-Jones C., 1979, *From the Milk's River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in North-West Amazonia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kalweit H., 1987, *The Way of the Shaman, Healers and Medicine Men*, London: Shambala.

Knight C., 1991, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press.

Langdon J. and Baer G., 1992, *Portals of Power: Shamanism in South America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press

Levi-Strauss C., 1949, L'efficacité Symbolique, in *Anthropologie Structurale*, Paris: Plon, pp. 205-226.

Lewis I., 1971, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Possession and Shamanism*, London: Penguin Books.

Luna E., 1984, The Concept of Plants as Teachers Among Four Mestizo Shamans of Iquitos, North-eastern Peru, *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, vol.11, pp. 135-156.

Luna E., 1986, *Vegetalismo: Shamanism among the Mestizo Population of the Peruvian Amazon*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.

Luna E., 1992, Magic Melodies among the Mestizo Shamans of the Peruvian Amazon, in *Portals of Power: Shamanism in South America*, Langdon J. and Baer G. eds., Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, pp. 231-253.

Luna E., 2001, Teacher Plants, in *Shamans Through Time: 500 Years on the Path to Knowledge*, Narby J. and Huxley F. eds., London: Thames and Hudson.

Mabit J., 1988, *L'hallucination par l'Ayahuasca chez les Guérisseurs de la Haute Amazonie Péruvienne*. Lima, Pérou: Institut Français des Etudes Andines.

Mabit, J., 1992(a) , “Consideraciones acerca del brebaje ayahuasca y perspectivas terapéuticas.” *Revista de Neuro-Psiquiatria*, 55, 118-131.

Mabit J., 1992(b), Article : *Interdépendances Magazine*.

Mabit J., 1996, “Ayahuasca and shamanism in addiction therapy: A report from the Peruvian Amazon.” *Bulletin of the Multidisciplinary Association from Psychedelic Studies*, 6, 24-31.

Métraux, A. 1944 “Le Shamanisme chez les Indiens de l’Amérique du Sud tropicale,” *Acta americana* (Mexico), II, 3-4.

Nakazawa R., 1996, *Medicina Tradicional Amazónica en el Tratamiento del Abuso de Drogas*. Tarapoto, Perú: Centro Takiwasi.

Naranjo, C., 1979, "Psychotropic properties of the Harmala alkaloids", in: *Ethnopharmacologic Search for Psychoactive Drugs*. New York : Raven Press.

Naranjo, C., 1987, "Ayahuasca Imagery and the Therapeutic Property of the Harmala Alkaloids". *Journal of Mental Imagery*.

Narby J., 1995, *Le Serpent Cosmique, L'ADN et les Origines du Savoir*, Geneva: Georg Editeur.

Olsen D., 1975, Music Induced Altered States of Consciousness Among Warao Shamans, in *Journal of Latin American Lore*, vol. 1(1), pp. 19-33.

Overing J., 1990, The Shaman as a Maker of Worlds: Nelson Goodman in the Amazon, in *Man* 25, pp. 601-19.

Richard G., 1988, *Vibrational Medicine*, Bear and Co.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, G. 1975 *The Shaman and the Jaguar: A study of Narcotic Drugs among the Indians in Colombia*. Philadelphia, USA: Temple University Press.

Rouget, G., 1980, *La musique et la transe. Esquisse d'une théorie générale des relations de la musique et de la possession*. Paris : Gallimard.

Rosaldo R., 1989, *Culture and Truth*. Boston, USA: Beacon Press.

Savary C., 1985, *Sound Health*, Harper and Row.

Schultes R. and Hofmann A., 1979, *Plants of God*. U.K: Mc Graw-Hill Book Co.

Schultes R. and Raffauf R., 1992, *Vine of the Soul: Medicine Men, their Plants and Rituals in the Colombian Amazon*, Santa Fe: Synergetic Press.

Shanon B., 2002, *The Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience*, draft manuscript submitted for publication.

Shepard G., 1998, Psychoactive Plants and Ethno-psychiatric Medicines of the Matsigenka, in *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, vol. 30 (4), pp. 321-332.

Silverman D., 2000, *Doing Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.

Spinella, M., 2001, *The Psychopharmacology of Herbal Medicine: Plant Drugs that alter Mind, Brain, and Behavior*. MA: MIT Press.

Strassman, R., 1994, "Human Psychopharmacology of LSD, dimethyltryptamine and related compounds", in: *50 Years of LSD: Current Status and Perspectives on Hallucinogens*. New York: Pantheon.

Strassman, R., 1996, Human psychopharmacology of N,N-dimethyltryptamine. *Behavioural Brain Research*.

Strassman, R., 2001, *DMT the Spirit Molecule*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.

Taussig M., 2000, Montage, in *The Ayahuasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon's Sacred Vine*, Luna E. and White S. eds, Synergetic Press, pp. 120-126.

Townsley G., 1993, Song Paths: The Ways and Means of Yaminahua Shamanic Knowledge, in *L'Homme*, 126-128, vol. XXXIII, nos.2-4, pp.449-468.

Townsley G., 2001, Twisted Language, in *Shamans Through Time: 500 Years on the Path to Knowledge*, Narby J. and Huxley F. eds., London: Thames and Hudson, pp. 263-271.

Turner E., 1993, The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?, in *The Anthropology of Consciousness*, vol. 4 (1), pp. 9-12.

APPENDIX1:
List of key questions to guide open interviews

How do they conceptualise the process of learning shamanic chants?

What are rituals chants according to you?

Where are the chants coming from (tradition, writing, personal creativity or are they inspired by another source?)?

How can you justify your ideas about the origin of chants?

Have you received a chant?

How did the chant manifest itself to you?

In which circumstances did you receive it?

In which language did you receive it?

Did you also receive the melody and rhythm or only the words?

Did you write it down immediately?

What made you feel that you remembered it as you received it?

Did you understand the meaning of the words?

Did you understand the meaning of the chant: was it for a specific therapeutical purpose?

Did you receive any other clues together with the chant?

Did you have any visions at the moment of receiving the chant?

How is this process related to the ritual taking plants?

Did you consciously prepare yourself to receive a chant?

Did this preparation entail the taking of plants?

Which plants facilitated your learning process?

What is a Master Plant?

Could you describe your diet of preparation?

How long do you have to prepare to become ready to receive a chant?

Are there any signs indicating that one is ready to receive a chant?

How are new chants ritually performed for a therapeutic purpose?

How can a chant interact in a therapeutical process to a patient?

What is the perceived therapeutic effect of chants?

When you received a chant was it with the purpose of curing a particular disease or patient?

When you are ritually performing chants do you have any indication of which chant you have to perform for such or such type of disease or patient?

Does it have any relationship with the patient or its particular disease or problematic?

Through which senses are these indications perceived (vision, sound, smell, touch, taste) or is it through a feeling of certainty?

Can you describe it for a specific case?

How could you describe the therapeutical results or the effects of chanting upon the patient?

Can you tell us about a specific case?

Are the words of the chant literal statements?

What is the significance of the images used in the chant?

How could you explain the therapeutical relationship between the meaning or the statements of the chants and their effect upon the patients?

Do you consider that someone else can use a chant received by another person for a therapeutical purpose?

Why?

How are chants passed on from shaman to shaman?

Do you think that a chant has the same effect when sung by another person?

Is it important to acknowledge who first received the chant?

Why?

APPENDIX 2:
Dairy

Ceremonial Fasting and Dieting at Curuyacu
March 25 to April 22, 2001.

- Sunday March 25:

Leaving Tarapoto.-

It is time to leave Tarapoto, a long trip awaits us and we are preparing to go to a small village called Curuyacu on the shores of the Huallaga River...

Mr. Edinson Ijuma, a “vegetalista” expert in “ceremonial dieting”, will wait for us there.

The ceremonial fasting and dieting is locally known as “dieta” according to the *vegetalistas* and is a process by which a person goes into the jungle and, isolated from the rest of the world, eats a few chosen foods without salt, sugar or spices, and drinks juices made out of plants in order to prepare for the healing process or to be ready to receive the plants teachings.

The healers of this part of the world are usually referred to as “vegetalistas” and are convinced that the knowledge of the shaman is directly acquired through Nature and the plants themselves. This is why the person interested must “dieta”, that is, be isolated for a time, and drink beverages made out of vines, roots, leaves or stems of different plants. By drinking these beverages the patient cleanses him/herself, is cured and has dreams or visions that provide direct knowledge about nature or, according to such healers, the spirit of the plants.

Luisa and I are willing to continue this withdrawal process and enter into the reclusive period so familiar to healers in the Amazon area.

I have already practiced such periods of fasting, dieting and isolation for the past five years as a means of learning, and, whenever possible, I go on short bouts of “dietas” in the jungle area of San Martin. I now have the opportunity of fasting for three weeks and having a much more intense experience of this process. My friend Luisa, who is visiting Peru, is very interested in the subject and has decided to accompany me to share in this experience of such ceremonial fasting and dieting for a short period of 8 days.

My current knowledge on the subject allowed me to help the “Vegetalista” take care of my friend during the retreat. I could learn from his experience, follow the process as an observer and, as an apprentice, acquire my own experience.

Curuyacu is not very far away, but you never know when you will finally arrive. The complicated aspect is the trip itself. Unexpected delays are common since the road and public transport services are in a precarious condition.

From Tarapoto we went ten miles along the *marginal del sur*, the southern highway of the jungle that joins the Northern coast of Peru up to the central highlands of the Andes passing through the jungle and crossing by the Department of San Martin. After we turned left towards the east, following the last curves of the Mayo River that runs into the Huallaga before the village of Shapaja. The roads are in a very bad state, the highway is too narrow and in order to follow the river you have to pass by a cliff called “Escalera”, the last mountainous area before reaching the huge Amazon basin. After the cliff, the

river opens up and gives way to the Chazuta Valley, District of the Bajo Huallaga Province.

We did not encounter any major difficulties during the trip and we only had a 2 hour delay before arriving at Chazuta. However, did have to hire a car. Then we had to wait for a riverboat to take us to Curuyacu, downriver. From then on, the only means of travel and communication in general is by riverboat that brings messages back and forth from the Quechuas people who live in the area.

Arrival at Curuyacu.-

We were lucky and had a good trip from Chazuta and neighboring villages up to Curuyacu 20 minutes away.

Curuyacu is a small village of fishermen and farmers that is located 7 miles from Chazuta on the shores of the Huallaga River. It is Quechua by origin however, over the years the people have become accustomed to this place and have clung to their native Quechua language. Spanish is therefore a language used for reference with non-speaking Quechua people. Most of the inhabitants are familiar with the shaman rituals, the use of Ayahuasca (*banisteriopsis caapi*) and know how to manage plants. They all have a great deal of respect for this ancestral knowledge including the younger generations who unfortunately have become heavily influenced by western culture. It is difficult to find a person who has a deep and authentic knowledge of traditional

medicine. The appearance of religious denominations such as, evangelists, tends to prohibit the use of plants as a source of psychoactive experiences, hence such knowledge is fading.

It is three o'clock in the afternoon and we finally have arrived. Our guide and host Edinson Ijúma is waiting for us at the river shore. His children run towards our boat and help us to disembark our backpacks and supplies. We peacefully walk towards my friend's home where he welcomes us cordially and graciously invites us in to take a rest and settle down. His home is a traditional *maloca* made out of mahogany with a straw thatched roof. There is only one room used for the ceremony for living purposes. There is another house next door that is used as a kitchen called "tuchpa", made out of mud and wood where soup is prepared each day.

After having rested for a while and had some tea with our host, we decided to stroll around since the village was enjoying a festivity that day. There was a football match on the main plot of land where most of the inhabitants flocked to cheer their local players. The football field was packed full and there was a small band of musicians called "pandilla", who played traditional tunes with a flute and drums, each beating away at the melodious rhythm being played.

We left the football field and went to the opposite side of the village. After walking for 10 minutes we found a small isolated house, the ideal spot for the ceremonial fasting and dieting such as what we were looking for. Speaking Don Edinson a few days before the trip, he said that he would prepare the fast for Luisa offering all sorts of support and comfort in a house nearby the village. It is always difficult to be in a totally isolated place in the jungle to fast for the first time, and you have to become

accustomed to the environment. The alternative of the house near the village is acceptable for a short 5-day retreat that does not interfere with a stricter isolation.

The traditionally built house is quite large, made out of branch and mud walls, with two rooms or separate quarters that faces a river with a pretty view.

There is a small path that runs some 30 meters long connecting the village to the nearby plots of farmland called "chacras".

Luisa is anxious to begin her fasting and feel much more at ease with the idea of sleeping in a house that is near the village. I much prefer the peacefulness of total isolation.

Back at Edinson's home, he calls me to prepare the beverage based on tobacco for Luisa's diet and fasting. My friend is going to diet on Beyaco Caspi and tobacco. Beyaco Caspi is a vegetable used to treat liver ailments and this is why she is going to fast with a special diet. Therefore, you can also drink tobacco during the diet with other plants to intensify the treatment. The tobacco, considered as a master plant full of wisdom by all inhabitants of the jungle is used as a beverage and enables the person who drink it to feel the dreams more intensely, amongst other things.

Edinson has already prepared the Beyaco Caspi. Luisa drinks tobacco twice when she begins her diet and the day she ended her fasting. The tobacco beverage still needs to be prepared and I was called in to do it.

We spoke a while about the amount of tobacco we should put into the glass of water to let it macerate until the following day; "10 or 12 "mapachos"? 10 would be alright Edinson stated."

The “mapachos” are traditional cigarettes used by the healers/curanderos in the area and are made out of pure black tobacco that are quite strong and completely natural.

We select the “mapachos” and empty them in water. After a while, Edinson pick another mapacho up and starts to whistle a few tunes in Quechua. He is “Ikarando” his cigarette. According to him, through his song he is invoking the spirits and forces in order to protect Luisa in her voyage with tobacco. These spirits are the spirits of the plants that he drank and that always accompany him. After his chants he lights the tobacco and smokes the beverages several times. The remedy is ready to be ingested. Luisa will start her “dieta” tomorrow.

We spend the rest of the day bathing in the river with the children of the village who are very curious about our presence there.

- Monday 26:

Luisa prepares her new house after a light lunch.

Her short five-day diet is about to begin. After having set up her bed and the mosquito net, we give out the last recommendations to ensure that everything will work out well.

During the fasting one can not bathe nor be in contact with people outside of the group and must stay inside the hut, outside of sunshine and the rain. No perfumes may be used nor soaps or other products that have perfumed essences.

These recommendations are very important indeed. It is true that the diet is short and the body will not be exposed to drastic changes during these five days, therefore the fact that one do not eat salt nor sugar during the isolation period weakens the body and the “vegetales” or remedies as they call it here, are for the purpose of taking care that the person does not have an extremely strong reaction. Rain for instance, may in some cases, stain the skin of an imprudent patient...

In the afternoon Edinson brings the medicine. Beyaco Caspi and Tobacco.

Luisa will start her diet by drinking tobacco, and tomorrow she will drink Beyaco Caspi during three days.

Before giving Luisa the glass of tobacco, Edinson once again start to chant his tune, with a “mapacho” in his hand. After a while he lights it and blows smoke on the liquid and on Luisa’s body. He starts with her head, her back, her chest,

and finally her hands. After this exercise he gives her the glass of tobacco liquid and tells her to drink it.

Luisa gives me a quick last glance before drinking the potion. Immediately after she swallows the beverage, her body starts shaking with slight convulsions, followed by general malaise and vomits. Don Edinson starts his chant again. After a while the patient settles down, goes to sleep and we leave her be.

During the night I talk to Don Edinson and ask him where he learnt what he knows about these plants and healing ceremonies.

Don Edinson Ijúma Panaijo is 60 years old and considered a “palero” but not a curandero or healer.

- “And pray tell, what is the difference”, I questioned him.
- “The difference is the treatment that one gives to a person. People look for me to diet with plants. I know how to prepare them, what amount to give to a person, and I know their healing properties. I show people how to diet just like my grandfather taught me. When they have specific ailments I know which plants to use that may be helpful. I take care of their diet and I dream them in the evenings. I check into them to see how they are doing and how the plant is treating them. The healers first of all diagnose a patient with the help of other plants such as Ayahuasca or Tobacco and after they prescribe a specific diet or give them Ayahuasca to drink with them and cure the patient. We are all “vegetalistas” that is, we manage the

knowledge of the rainforest, the plants, however in these plants there are different specialities”...

- “How did you learn don Edinson?”
- “Dieting with the plants themselves.”
- ”How much time, how long did you diet?”
- “Several times, but the longest time was three months.”
- “You were isolated for three months in a small hut in the jungle without the company of anybody else ?”
- “Yes, this is what one does when you want to learn. Little by little by drinking this beverage, the spirit of the plant approaches you and speaks to you through dreams and visions and you receive the knowledge of its medicine while at the same time it heals you.”

I have always been fascinated by this way of understanding nature and believing in it. This makes evident to me the strong ties that the people in the Amazon have with their natural surroundings. By listening to Edinson one thinks that in reality he learnt to listen to the language of the plants...

The language of plants, what am I talking about?

To be able to access such understanding, he isolated himself from the rest of humanity and ingested huge amounts of potions prepared with these plants. These beverages enabled him to establish contact with these plants and receive their wisdom. But before this happened the plants cured him.

Or perhaps we should think that it is through healing oneself, understanding oneself, learning to listen to oneself by being isolated for such a long time, and in particular, in a special place, that new knowledge is shed upon the learner or that one's perceptions are sharpened, and this is what enables one to truly feel one's surroundings?

In what really consist this isolation?

I have spoken to several curanderos/vegetalistas of this region about the subject. Each has his own system or way of approaching the matter, of understanding and defining the diet, each defends his own views and states that his is the best. But there are similarities amongst all, for instance, abstention from sex.

Edinson received his knowledge from his grandfather and he explained to me about the diet he uses:

- "How do you diet Don Edinson?"
- "The diet consist in drinking "vegetales" or plants..., and well, to begin to fast or diet in this manner you really have to think about it first, set your mind to it because it is not easy to do, and once you start you have to fulfil your obligations, there is no turning around, no way back."
- "What are these obligations?"
- "Well, when you diet, you can not eat salt or sugar. You cannot lie with a woman. You cannot take sunlight, nor rain. You cannot use perfumes or

any other personal hygiene product. Often you do not wash yourself during the fasting period. But this depends upon the type of plant you use when dieting.”

- Why do such restrictions exist, of what use are they?”
- “When you stop eating salt and sugar, your body becomes weak and very sensitive. When you ingest the plant you come under the influence of this plant, you have dreams and visions sometimes. It is like opening your body; the plant goes in and starts to trigger a reaction. Under such circumstances it is not good to expose oneself to external forces in view of the fact that one is extremely sensitive. Strong odours, the presence of a woman who is menstruating or having intercourse are elements that go against dieting and will make you very ill.”
- “How long must one respect these restrictions?”
- “This depends upon how long one diets. I was taught like this: When you drink the plant you are isolated and not allowed to eat food with salt or sugar. After taking the plant you still do not eat salt the same period of time you drunk the plant. At the end of this time, you can eat food with salt and the next day you can bathe. Little by little you resume your daily routine, eating what you normally do while your body becomes re-accustomed once again, not only to the food but to personal hygiene products as well, perfumes, etc... At the end of 30 to 45 days you can eat sweet foods. Once you do, you are free from the former obligations and can have intercourse as usual.”

- "I suppose that the longer one goes on such dieting, the more sensitive your body becomes, and even more delicate is the matter of resuming your normal habits once again".
- "Certainly".

- Tuesday 27 – Friday 30:

The week went by peacefully and little work. There was a lot of rain and when this happens in the jungle, everything gets bogged down with mud. We were able to build my shelter or tambo for the dieta near the bank of the river.

It took four men to open a trail among the vines and plants that thrive on these hilly terrains. We reached a plateau that had very tall trees and began to organize camp and prepare the branches needed to build the shelter, called “tambo”. First of all you dig a hole in the ground and put four wooden stakes to prop up the roof. After you place the large branches across these wooden columns. It is hard work, but simple to do. The roof is the most complicated and lengthy task. Palm branches are brought in and braided to make two large sections to cover the roof. These are placed on the cross cutting beams made out of the branches to make “cumba” or small round roof that is used as a hat or “sombbrero” between the two panels of braided palm leaves that provide full protection against the rain.

It took us two days to finish the “tambo”.

Aside from building the tambo, the visits paid to Luisa and her diet were the highlights of the week.

She had a wonderful experience with the tobacco, which was not too strong. I suppose that this was because she took a small quantity and the preparation had not been macerated for a long time either. Edinson decided to prepare another, much stronger potion, for the second session. The Beyaco Caspi apparently triggered an effect and

Luisa physically feels the plant: she feels sick, she feels like vomiting, and her bowel movements are much more frequent each time she drinks the potion.

Luisa mentioned the fact she had many dreams throughout the week and went into emotional ups and downs. When one goes into isolation you have the opportunity to be all alone with yourself and this exercise is sometimes a difficult one, because you remember things in addition to the malaise of life that has become routine and engrained in your mind and thoughts. These reactions verify the fact that the plant not only bears a physical but an emotional and psychic effect on the patient...that is, it touches upon the person's very spirit?

Today she will drink another tobacco potion.

It is nearly 5 p.m. when we approach the small house where Luisa is staying. We salute the tobacco drink held in the hand before entering. Edinson sits down and asks her how she is doing, how does she feel. She is all right and peaceful. She is happy that tomorrow she is ending her "dieta". What will happen to me after three weeks time?

Just like the first time, Edinson takes a cigarette out and starts to chant his tunes, whistling and then singing a Quechua song. After a while he lights the tobacco and blows the smoke into the remedy several times. He offers the drink to Luisa who receives it and drinks it in one gulp. Its effect becomes evident immediately and she starts to feel convulsions and wants to vomit. Edinson blows smoke at her body and starts to whistle his tunes and to sing. She lays down in a trance, starts to vomit again. Don Edinson continues singing a little by little the effects dwindle. Luisa is resting, we leave her alone.

- Saturday 31:

Don Edinson has gone to look for his canoe that is missing. Edinson is worried, a canoe is a considerable investment and if one loses a canoe, he also loses his only means of transport.

He left me alone and went to find the canoe down river accompanied by his children, with the responsibility to stop Luisa's diet.

The moment of stopping a diet is very important and is when the patient is finally allowed to eat with salt. By doing so, the person's body recovers some of its "protection" and allows the patient to gradually adopt his or her routine way of life. I do not know if the word protection is appropriate, let us just say that the body is no longer exposed to strong burst of energy, but it is nonetheless still very sensitive...

The custom in these whereabouts is to end the diet by eating food with salt and aji (chilli).

The aji helps the patient recover his or her strength. During the time of isolation the only food one can eat is a bit of rice and plantains (plantain bananas) that weakens the body.

I then have to prepare breakfast for Luisa: bananas with salt and aji, a far cry from French cuisine, but it is a tasty treat after the diet!

When ending the diet the patient receives clouds of tobacco smoke blown (soplada) at him or her in order to "close" and "organize" the body. In this case I am purposely referring to the expressions used by Don Edinson, which are difficult to explain from a scientific viewpoint. We can say that the diet consists in a work that affects the energy field of a person. The patient dieting opens his or her energy field of their bodies and receives the energy of the plant. By ingesting salt again this field of energy is closed but the person's body contains all the energy of the plant. Blowing tobacco smoke or

perfume (soplada) on the patient's body after having "ikarado", that is chanting the tobacco or perfume that is being blown helps to settle the vegetal in one's body and ends the diet.

Luisa was very eager to break her fasting. It is true that after one full week barely eating a little bit of rice and plantains, aji and salt were a delight. Very calmly I picked up a "mapacho" and started to chant an Ikaro tune I had learnt in Quechua...

Nuye nuye nuye si Warmasita kaya muni,
 Nuye nuye nuye si Warmasita kaya muni.
 Remolino jukumanta sawayanga, sawayanga,
 Remolino jukumanta sawayanga, sawayanga.
 Ay nana nay, nay nay nay nay.....

After blowing the smoke and eating we chatted a while about the diet and its effects. Luisa was very happy and asked me how people are able to diet for months under such conditions. She thought that six days isolation was hard enough... But now after the ordeal, she feels very well and eager, but a bit weak, because of the diet, but very satisfied with herself.

Therefore the work with plants cannot be measured yet. A diet reveals its final results when the person goes back to his or her milieu and also fulfils the other restrictions (not eating sweet foods and no intercourse) that are the element

after the diet has ended. These restrictions are necessary because the body has been exposed for some time to a doses of plants (vegetales) that bear strong effects and the body needs time to readjust itself to its normal eating habits. As concerns not having sex, aside from the mythical significance or religious taboo, is more a question of taking care of ones own “energy”. When working with plants the patient is working on his or herself and when you have sex you mix your energy with that of your partner, your partner’s “energy” or “force”, and this can weaken or “shock” you. Mention must be made of the fact that acute sensitivity when one stops dieting, is like being born again ...

Beyond this explanation, local belief has it that there is a respect for the plants’ genies, elves, and spirits.... When you diet the main vegetal absorbs the forces of these genies that live in these plants, and they are very jealous and punish those who do not diet properly.....

Luisa has to wait a few hours before she can bathe. After six days she is rearing to go.... All types of soaps and perfumes are still forbidden for a few more days.

Luisa has come back from don Edinson’s house and is preparing for her trip back to the city. We say our goodbyes to each other. Tomorrow morning she will take the riverboat to Chazuta while I will be preparing myself to enter my newly built “home” in the jungle.

Edinson came back rather late from his expedition. He found his canoe but could not bring it back because of the strong seasonal current in the river. After resting he talked to Luisa, and recommended once again that she should watch her diet.

“Up to this point I have been responsible, I do not want anything bad to happen to you or make you ill, he used the term “malogres” which means ruined.

“If you respect the plants they will always take care of you.”

After speaking about the subject of taking care of the diet once again he blew Luisa with “Sacha Canela” (wild cinnamon) and perfume to protect her against other harmful odours.

Luisa was very happy and thankful for the work and her experience with the diet and peacefully left for her trip back to Tarapoto.

- Monday April 2:

Yesterday I entered my tambo around 4 p.m. After having prepared my bed, a small table and the mosquito net, I took my last bath of the next three weeks. Don Edinson brought my potion which he called a “preparado”: a bucket and a half (approximately 27 litres) of a dark brown liquid that does not taste very good...This is the *preparado* that I will have to drink over the next ten days.

The way the remedy was prepared was very interesting. Edinson and I had been walking out in the jungle very early in the morning looking for the right vegetales/plants for the diet. Each time we found a plant Edinson would blow tobacco smoke on it before cutting it and putting it into a bag.

The tobacco plays an essential role in Amazon healing practices, in fact it is an indigenous plant, discovered by the Conquistadores, is widely and systematically used... In this case it is used to avoid adverse effects... It is a bit confusing to understand this concept of “shock”. We will now refer back to the common concept of the jungle that explains that plants have spirits or are inhabited by “mothers” and bear an impact on the patient when he or she drinks the beverage that has been adequately prepared with these plants. When harvesting these plants that have such an important role to play as the “healers” it is very important to protect or better said, to appease the spirit of these plants by using the tobacco smoke to avoid the adverse effects on the patient, that is, so that the person will not fall ill.... There are certain similarities with the rituals of North American Indians who bless the plants or trees not with

smoke but with the tobacco itself, before they cut the plant, in respect and as a sign of gratefulness for Mother Nature. I saw Don Edinson come close to a tree called Killuwiqui and strike up a conversation with its “spirit”, asking it permission to use its branches and its support in the diet that was intended to take place.

The beverage was made out of 13 different plants:

- Yacu Sisa (a water plant)
- Kamé (the bark of a tree)
- Killuwiqui (the bark of a tree)
- Bobinzana (the stem of a shrub)
- Bobinzanillo
- Mullaka
- Businghja
- Yana Acero Huasca (a vine “acero” means steel and yana means black).
- Yurac acero huasca (yurac means white)
- Millua renaquillo
- Renaco
- Nina caspi
- Tobacco

After gathering all the necessary plants, Edinson started a fire, he placed all the “vegetales” he had gathered in small pieces inside a large pot full of water and left it boiling. After a while he added a bit of tobacco.

He boiled the mixture for a long time..

Afterwards, Don Edinson took the pot off the fire and started to chant a tune with a “mapacho” in his hand and he lit it and blew the mixture several times until he emptied its contents into two large pales. The mixture was finally ready.

I waited until 6 p.m. to digest lunch a bit before drinking my first glass of the plant mixture.

You can put up with the taste, but you should avoid it fermenting too much in the heat ...

After a while I started to feel slightly hot and had a slight “mareación” or dizziness, a very mild one, very subtle.

Several hours later I drank another glassful and this heightened the effects of the mareacion: this is a state in which the mind gradually takes over and leads the person into the realm of his or her deepest thoughts accompanied by the rhythm of the penetrating night time noises from the jungle.

An animal with a bitter cry came close to the tambo. The presence of animals during these periods of seclusion is important and sometimes has to do with the plants that are used or the personality of the person who drinks the

potion... The most difficult thing is to try to find the best possible interpretation of these happenings.

I remember a time when I had gone on a similar diet and was under the influence of the dizzy spell and I visualized an alligator that suddenly appeared. Of course the main difference is that it was like a vision and not a true appearance of the animal. Therefore, when I had this vision I started to ask it if it wanted to help me in my work as apprentice and the vision gradually came closer and closer to me while the animal entered my body through my ribs. I was very surprised by this experience and told my healer friend about it. He told me that he had had similar experiences in his dreams when he dieted during which time animals such as serpents and even dragons had visited him and put him to the test. According to him, when one overcomes or confronts such visions they become your "allies" which eventually is extremely useful for the work of a shaman, particularly in managing plants that have psychoactive ingredients such as Ayahuasca.

Why?

Because Ayahuasca (*banisteriopsis caapi*) is like a developer. For instance, when you reveal photographs, the moment the film is revealed you have to use different liquids that enable you to fix the image on paper. Just imagine that Ayahuasca is exactly the same, since it helps you to reveal what you have inside yourself.

So, when you diet with different plants you gain strength, wisdom and allies. When you take Ayahuasca these forces, manifest themselves and appear

before you and allow you to act as a healer or guide of your patients or those who participate in the ritual...

Hence, animals play a very important role in Amazon shamanism... and not only as concerns the myths but also in daily events (not to mention hunting...).

One of my informants who is a famous Shipibo healer called Guillermo Arevalo, has told me that when you go out to fetch Ayahuasca in the jungle area in order to prepare the potion, you must be guided by the sound of a small bird. This animal is like an AGÜERO, messenger, who by the sound of his chirping announces if it is appropriate or not to cut the plant to prepare the remedy ...

This small bird or night time animal continues to sing and I feel fear as well as curiosity ...

Today, the first Monday after starting my period of seclusion, I woke up well, without a headache that had been bothering me the day before...I suppose that the jungle made me well...healed me...

It is incredible to see how one can remember in one's dreams is made much clearer by dieting. I woke up and remembered by dreams clearly. The plants play a very interesting role in awakening the mind and body's sensitivity. It is also true that the food diet also helps a great deal but after just one day your body is still not accustomed to this new rhythm...

It is already 5 p.m. The day went by so quickly. Let me see what the night will bring... Normally I do not sleep very much at all when I diet...

I drunk quickly a large amount of vegetal/plant throughout the day, and drank five glasses of "purga" since this morning. When I mention glass, I am referring to a "pato" as it is locally called, made out of wood in a pumpkin the size of two hands joined together...

This remedy is strong. When you drink it your body feels very warm, especially my skull, as if I were concentrating forces near my head ...

I fell asleep for most of the day. The three glasses I had taken in the morning added unto the fact that the weather was very hot, left me dizzy for a long time before I finally fell asleep, without dreaming...what an irony! It must be the heat.

Don Edinson paid me a visit around 3 p.m. and brought me some food, green boiled plantain bananas without salt.

He told me that the heat that I felt near my skull is because of "Nina caspi". This plant is associated to heat, fire. Each master plant has a mother or a spirit that defines its qualities and effects...

This reminded me of the words of the French anthropologist, Jean Pierre Chaumeil who in his book stated "Voir, Savoir, Pouvoir" in which he talks about

curanderismo or shamanism of the Yaguas Indians. They also declare the same. Each medicinal plant has a mother and the apprentice meets these spirits when they drink the potions. The mother spirit teaches the apprentice the secrets and powers of its plant.

The fact that I was unable to bathe for a period of three weeks bothered me very much and I asked Don Edinson if there was any inconvenience of wetting my head a little bit with river water in the evening... He replied and explained that I could insofar as I did not go too close to the river and did not wet all of myself.

During this season of the year the Huallaga River is very full. We are in the midst of the rainy season and the flow of water is very high and speedy. My tambo is located about 150 meters from the shores at a certain height from where you can see the current flowing and the whirlwinds sucking different things into it and transport them towards the Marañon and the Amazonas Rivers... It is a true pleasure for me to leave such silence of dieting and come close to the shores each evening to watch river in its path, observe the movements of the people who live on the other shore and sit down and listen to the water flowing ...

One of the greatest difficulties of this diet, in my opinion, is to try to focus one's mind on the true purpose of the retreat... Apparently the food restrictions plus the effects of the plant increase my mental activity and leads me to review my

past actions and attitudes... Somehow, this is good because it enables me to realize, think and adjust my vision of myself, but, the difficulty is quieting one's mind, shutting it off when you want to rest...to not allow your mind to wander and think about false worries. The funny thing is that I am reading a book: "The Shamanic Extasis of Consciousness" by Dr. Valentin Hampej. He explains a series of different religious concepts and in particular yogi exercises to do away with useless thoughts. When I observe my own mental attitude, I remind myself that I am far from illumination!

- Tuesday April 3:

I had many dreams last night. A mixture of thoughts about my life (once again). It is 9:30, Don Edinson has already come to visit me and left me a bit of mingado (rice with a lot of water), and we had time to chat a while...

He told me that it is important that I be blown with tobacco smoke each time I want to go to the river ..."The Yacu Shimbillo can harm you"...

Yacu Shimbillo means little water devil. In other words the spirit that lives in the water can be harmful to you since you are dieting and the echo of blowing tobacco smoke protects your body and spirit...

Once again I encounter the notion of harm and protection that is so important in Amazon folklore and I believe that this somehow defines more or less the concept that they have about the illness.

People usually, in popular folklore, according to what I have been able to witness in the San Martin region of Peru, is defined as a high jungle region, and there people classify illnesses into three categories:

- Illnesses caused by the air, gusts of wind, chills, etc.
- The evil eye.
- A bad spell.

The first, ills from drafts of wind, etc., is weather related.

The evil eye is an illness that has to do with somebody else's presence.

A bad spell obviously involves black magic, that is, a spell cast by a brujo or witch on someone.

After a while I asked Don Edinson where there were not many women healers around. His answer made me smile: "Because they do not want to", he answered.

According to him there are no prohibitions concerning women and dieting. They do not become healers because they would have to become involved in such tasks and leave aside their family responsibilities, such as, caring for their children and managing their households. The concept of gender is not an issue that is well understood or considered around these parts of the world and if it were not out of need (an illness for example) women must fulfil their reproductive role and responsibilities as housewives...and that is very sad. Therefore, I have seen women of the region manage the plants of the rainforest very well, particularly their own gardens, as a source of medicine

against fevers, coughs, the flu for cure their children. The man manages the roots and bark of the rainforest as well as the hallucinogenic substances. I also believe that when a woman goes on a special diet for weeks on end she is putting her reproductive role at risk because the diet is very strict. In this area, mother's milk is the most precious food for newborn babies...

It is 4 p.m., and the day has gone by quickly... I realize that my body is getting weaker and weaker. The process is slow and drinking plants astringent and the fact not eating salt weakens you very much.

I drank a lot of the remedy during the first day but I did not get very dizzy at all, perhaps because the food I ate that day was a bit richer than yesterday. My whole body is invaded by a new feeling. It is as if for fleeting moments, all the jungle around me becomes transformed into one huge plant. This feeling crops up every so often and is very intense indeed and I am filled with a deep inner silence...

- Wednesday April 4:

I like it here.

No matter how dramatic it may seem to start on the diet, I consider it to be a privilege that many people should know about and exercise more often. The world in which we live is such a fast pace and full of images that one reveals to

one's surroundings, that we can hardly stop and think about what and who we really are, our very essence and the meaning of our lives. The period of seclusion is one way of delving into such thoughts and become enriched by the experience.

I spent a bad night last night. At the beginning it was difficult but I had many dreams. It is amazing how clear these dreams are. It is as if after having listened to an old recording in mono for many months on end, suddenly I can enjoy a stereo digital dolby.

For the time being my dreams have nothing to do with medicine or learning, and linger much more on personal matters of past experience, my relationship with my father for example. It is as if the plant wants to teach me a lesson.

Aside from these teachings, there is a true learning process: to learn about oneself, and I think that my meagre experience and the information that I have gathered by exchanging views with others over the past five years that I have lived in the jungle, that learning about healing (curanderismo,) shamanism or Amazon traditional medicine, goes through acquiring knowledge about oneself and an in-depth assimilation of one's own self. When the apprentice is ready and has done his part, the plants reveals itself more openly... and teaches lessons that are directly related to the world of flora. But, the apprenticeship really involves everything...

- Thursday April 5:

It was a very long night...I practically did not sleep at all...and that little bird comes to see me each evening and perches itself on top of my "tambo" and chirps away.

I fell into a deep sleep at dawn and I woke up late and lazy.

Once again I had many dreams, people I know from former jobs, my family.....

When I drink the plant I feel tired and weak, the heat is relentless and you feel hot and sticky, and what makes matters worse, is that you are forbidden to wash yourself....

- Friday April 6:

The sleepiness fades gradually.... I spend my days reading and thinking deep thoughts about myself. This is the fruit of the diet. In the evenings, I no longer feel tired and my mind becomes frantically active. The body is all right, aside from some stomach upsets and a strong dizzy spell resulting from drinking more of the potion, I have stuck to the diet very well. I have already lost a lot of weight.

I spent half the night thinking a thousand thoughts, past situations, future projects and new ideas, people, etc...

A jungle rat that dropped by to pay me a visit interrupted my thoughts. These rats are called "hushpa suri" in Quechua. A strange noise attracted my attention and I feel scared at the beginning until I discovered the culprit with my flashlight. He is worried a bit, but when I spotted him with the flashlight he just looked back steadily for a moment before scurrying off among the leaves on the roof.

I woke up rather late and was not hungry and did not want to eat the three bananas that Don Edinson had left me while I slept. I finally decided to drink a large glass of the potion and eat a bit.

I spent most of the morning absorbed in reading Reichell Dolmatoff's book. I am amazed at reading how many different ways there are of drinking potions by reading this book. Apparently, each indigenous people drink potions in different manners according to the beliefs, culture and myths. The strangest thing is that most consider their way as the most adequate.

Few of such readings speak about the magical songs called "Ikaros" chanted during the ritual ceremonies, nor mention their therapeutical aspects or the role they play by invoking the spirits of plants or animals....

What has always fascinated me is the power of the healer to call for different allies be they vegetal, animal or spirits, to help in the work being done.

The shamanism that I am familiar with is actually mestizo or a blend, and involves all the different indigenous practices in this new trend... There is no reference to the myth in the ritual any more. The drinking of psychoactive such as Ayahuasca for example, is related to healing aspects much more than anything else.

Many mestizo healers have included songs, habits or manner of behaving that are indigenous to many different cultures but in reality are opposed to each other. Nonetheless they are still part of one same mestizo way of managing the situation and have acquired a new meaning and form part of a new framework...

Some monkeys visited me during the afternoon. I was playing a calimba, a small African instrument that I always bring along with me and the monkeys had a strong reaction to this sound that was unfamiliar to them. One of them was even brave enough to climb down the tree and unto the closest branch near my "tambo" and started screeching moving his head back and forth. We stared at each other for a long while until he decided to follow his group into the jungle.

- Monday April 9:

The week has ended. The more time elapses, the less I want to go back and sit down at my desk to write or become involved in any other activity. I feel the

plant creeping into my body more deeply and awakening my senses much more. It is an interesting process but, at times it may be despairing as well.

Yesterday we had presidential elections and I enjoyed watching people come and go on the riverboats all day long.

Everybody from the small hamlets called caserillos and small towns around Chazuta went to vote and I could see all types of boats floating up and downriver in the morning transporting people back and forth.

At the beginning of the second week I feel more at peace with myself; it is as if the first time I had to become accustomed to my surroundings and I had to learn how to harness my impatience and restlessness.

I am unable to sleep these nights...I devote time to read and think, and think, and think, and think, endlessly...it is as if I were reviewing my entire life. The psychological work becomes apparent through the effects brought about by dieting.

I still have a bit of the potion left since I drank quite a lot these days and if I continue at the same pace in three days time I will not have any left at all. I will then have to wait more time, that is, up to ten days more or less, before I can eat salt again and leave the retreat and finally take a bath, at last!

- Wednesday April 11:

I had two difficult days...I was unable to read, write, focus my ideas....I feel persecuted by dozens of thoughts at the same time. My body that feels very weak begins to feel muscle pains, rheumatic pains that come and go. The plants are working increasingly more. I finished drinking the potion...now I just have to wait.

- Thursday April 12:

Orlando Chujandama paid me a visit today. He is a healer of the area, and he offers ayahuasca and master plants and manages diets as well. His visit is a happy occasion for me. Normally when you diet nobody comes to visit you mainly because few people are prepared to do it.

Orlando Chujandama is the grandchild of a well-known master curandero or healer who died 10 years ago and is very famous throughout the region. People say that he had a boa and a mermaid as allies who lived in the ravine next to his house.

Mermaids are often mentioned in Amazon folklore many people tell stories about pink dolphins and mermaids in rivers.

Orlando asked me what I was drinking and we spoke about plants, particularly Nina Caspi that is a difficult plant used in dieting because it generates heat in your body.

“Now that you have finished drinking the potion it will have an increasing effect on you. You just won’t want to sit down”... Orlando declared.

- Saturday April 14:

It has been impossible to neither write anything whatsoever nor clearly focus on my reading. The exercise of thinking has become my prime target...I am waiting for time to go by, to keep going, to be patient..and this is a hard task in itself. This is part of the work of dieting, to leave time do its job and cure one’s impatience.

- Thursday April 19:

My last day of dieting!

For the moment I cannot fathom the idea of staying secluded in the jungle for three months... this would require proper training.

Don Edinson has just left and I am happy to know that tomorrow I will end my diet. He had a dream of me and saw me sitting on the river shore with some vegetables at my side that accompanied me. According to him, these are the plants that I have been drinking and are now a part of me and will accompany me always.

I asked him what he did to dream about his patients like this and he told me that before falling asleep he smokes two "mapachos". These black cigarettes of the jungle and that during the night he would have visions in his dreams that were very clear and involved people, in particular the people that were dieting under his care.

I am very happy to learn that the plants can be felt inside my body. This means that they enhance my capacity to work as a curandero or healer during rituals, and I am eager to put this to the test....

This news invigorated me a little and filled me with happiness. In a few days time I will re-encounter my wife and two children who travelled to Colombia to wait for me there. I have not stopped thinking about them all these days...

- Friday 20:

Don Edinson arrived rather early.

The traditional meal with salt and aji was waiting for me.

He sat down quietly and smiled at me with satisfaction and happiness. He took his tobacco and started chanting. After a while he lit the cigarette and blew tobacco smoke over me, my head, back and hands. He also blew tobacco smoke over my meal and invited me to taste a bit.

It was delicious!

Life began all over...

Salt has an immediate effect and after eating a bit I became very thirsty and started to sweat heavily.

I am very happy that I have ended my diet...

The day went by peacefully, and I had time to organize my belongings and recover my strength. I even went out for a walk, without exposing myself to the sunlight too much. Any sustained effort is still very difficult. I even have difficulty breathing...

- Saturday 21:

Edinson arrived early and helped me pack my things.

I am heading for the village..

When you stop fasting and dieting you get a sensation of re-birthing. You feel moved by everything that surrounds you. What you considered to be boring before the retreat is now a source of recreation and happiness.

When I crossed the river I felt the sunbeams burning my scalp.

When I reached the village everybody was happy to see me so thin and with a grown beard that was one month old. After a while the midday sun had heated the water in the river, Edinson told me that I could take a bath. Freedom...3 weeks without a bath!

I waded in the water for a long while, splashing around just like a child, and discovering the beauty of it all just like the first time.

Lunch was chicken broth with vegetables. A true feast after three weeks of eating bananas with rice. You have to eat slowly, if not I could get sick and I must realize that my body has to become accustomed to different foods once again.

I spent the afternoon resting while Edinson was working on his farm with his children...

At night we ate a delicious soup and then sat down and smoked the traditional "mapachos". Don Edinson made me smoke several "mapachos" and he blew

the smoke over me several times. After he took the bottle of perfume "Ikaró" the liquid with his chants and blew the perfume all over my body.

Its odor provoked a strong reaction in me, I got dizzy but it was like waking up, it had an invigorating effect.

Afterwards to continued chatting about the importance of taking care of one's diet:

- 30 days deprived of sweet foods
- 45 days without intercourse

- Sunday 22:

It is time to leave, I say goodbye to my friends at Curuyacu and start my trip back to my "normal" life. I am bringing with me a piece of the jungle, inside me, and I feel very happy that I have been able to have such a long experience, that I now realize is actually short as compared to long diets that last several months that apprentices usually go through. Little by little.

I am eager to see my family and share my experience with them. A new chapter has started and we will see over the next Ayahuasca rituals, how all these plants that have accompanied me so many sleepless nights over the past three weeks will have an effect.