

THE EROTIC INTELLIGENCE OF PLANTS:
A HEURISTIC INQUIRY OF WOMEN'S SEXUAL/SPIRITUAL
EXPERIENCES WITH SACRED AMAZONIAN PLANT TEACHERS

by

Yalila Espinoza

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read THE EROTIC NATURE OF PLANTS:
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Espinoza, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving
a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in East–West Psychology at the California
Institute of Integral Studies.

Meg Jordan, Ph.D., RN, Chair
Professor of Integrative Health, Program Director of Somatic Psychology,
Integrative Health & Human Sexuality

Carol Whitfield, Ph.D.
Professor, East–West Psychology

Gina Ogden, Ph.D., LMFT
Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality

Yalila Espinoza
California Institute of Integral Studies, 2013
Meg Jordan Ph.D., Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigated how sacred Amazonian plant teachers (that is to say, plants believed to possess spirits who communicate with humans) offered erotic experiences that transformed women's sexual/spiritual lives. A qualitative research methodology following Moustakas's (1990) heuristic approach was utilized. The data was collected through interviews with seven North American women who participated in ayahuasca ceremonies and plants diets within the Shipibo vegetalista tradition of Peru. The general research question that guided the study was as follows: How can Amazonian plant teachers offer women erotic experiences that transform the quality of their sexual/spiritual lives?

Nine core themes were identified from the data analysis: purification and support for reproductive health; increased sensory awareness; healing sexual abuse trauma; transforming relationship with self; empowered decision making; enhanced intimacy with others; enhanced cognitive awareness; connecting with subtle energies; and connecting with God. The findings highlighted that women's experience with plant teachers involved energetic purification and openings that

inspired transformation on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels. The women stated that they felt physically supported through reproductive phases such as menstruation, fertility, pregnancy, and menopause and that particular physical ailments were cured. Several of the women experienced healing of emotional and spiritual aspects that were intimately interwoven with past sexual abuse trauma. Along with physical and emotional purification there were cognitive and behavioral realignments that occurred. The women mentioned the importance of setting boundaries, protecting their energetic space, and exercising assertiveness and discernment in their relationships. They found that plant teachers offered a connection with other-than-human entities in the subtle realms as well as a pathway to God. They remembered that honoring their feminine identity and viewing their bodies as sacred temples were the foundation in becoming spiritually embodied.

Although some authors have alluded to the intersection between vegetalismo and eroticism (Beyer, 2009; Campos, 2011; Cowen, 1995; Glass-Coffin, 1998; Metzner, 2006; Razam, 2010) there has been no rigorous research conducted on this phenomenon as well as a lack of female perspective in the literature, in particular about issues of sexual health, and it is hoped that this study is a contribution to the field of vegetalismo studies. The intention of the primary researcher was to dive into the depths of the mystery to affirm women's embodied wisdom, the divine feminine, and the erotic impulse in life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This qualitative, heuristic study investigated how sacred Amazonian plant teachers offered erotic experiences that transformed women's sexual/spiritual life. The plant teachers focused on in this study are distinguishable from other plants in that they may have cathartic properties, produce hallucinations and dizziness, and activate vivid dreams (Luna, 1984). There is a plethora of literature to date on vegetalismo and ayahuasca, such as psychological discussions focusing on the physical, emotional, and spiritual experiences of plant drinkers (Bustos, 2008; Metzner, 2006; Shanon, 2002; Trichter, 2007), anthropological discussions focusing on the cultural groups and systems that highlight ayahuasca (Dobkin de Rios, 1984; Horner, 2006; Luna, 2008) and discussions on ayahuasca's healing potential of disease and addiction (Mabit, 2007). The literature includes anecdotes suggesting a connection between plants in the areas of love, sex, and reproduction (Beyer, 2009; Perruchon, 2003; Razam, 2009; Tedlock, 2005). Although some authors allude to the erotic nature of Amazonian plants, there has been no rigorous research conducted on this phenomenon. I was compelled to explore the belief that some plant teachers have sexual personalities and can experience sexual playgrounds within human bodies.

Personal Connection to the Topic

This topic had personal relevance for my emotional, spiritual, and professional life and I acknowledge that I have been privileged to learn about Amazonian plant teachers both experientially and academically. It was in a dream that spirit led me to the mysterious realm of *vegetalismo*, a healing practice using Amazonian plant teachers in South America. I travelled to Peru to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies after the sudden death of my partner, wondering if I could be nursed back to a sense of hopefulness about the future. During seven years of participating in plant ceremonies and diets I have experienced deep healing through a process of integrating my South American ancestry (Ecuadorian) with my North American upbringing (Canadian).

From my very first ayahuasca ceremony I have been receiving guidance by the plant teachers about the erotic nature of reality. The concept of “erotic intelligence” emerged and has been simmering in my psyche and belly for the last few years. In the literature erotic intelligence has been primarily defined to involve sexual/spiritual unions in the material realm (Katehakis, 2010; Taylor, 2009). In my opinion, erotic intelligence means knowing how to be intimately united with the universal creative force in all its forms within the material and subtle realms¹. Erotic

¹ The definition of “subtle realm” for this study refers to the realm where visions can be seen in altered states of consciousness such as in the dream state, meditation, and through the ingestion of hallucinogenic plants such as ayahuasca.

intelligence activates the sensual body inspiring one to be passionately intimate with primordial love energy. This activation encourages one to rise to a freedom of expression and connection with all that is alive. Erotic intelligence venerates the divine feminine and masculine, celebrates love, and is the cosmic impulse that creatively births our evolution.

A human's first experience of an altered state of consciousness with DMT² is when the soul enters its new body in utero (Strassman, 2001). Building upon the idea that the pineal gland and the sexual organs both develop seven weeks after conception (Strassman, 2001) I hypothesized that hallucinogenic plant teachers (with DMT) affecting the pineal gland help humans continue an exploration into other dimensions through sexual/spiritual experiences. Hence, ayahuasca can provide sexual/spiritual experiences that are highly beneficial for human development. Ayahuasca can highlight how erotic intelligence is neither simply expressed through sexual activity in the material realm nor spiritual journeying in the subtle realm but is dynamically created and negotiated between the material and subtle realms. Individual erotic identity emerges through the weaving of subjective perception, meaning making, and negotiating interactions in intimate relationships.

² Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), is a compound of the tryptamine family. When DMT is ingested in the form of a drug it can create a range of altered states where one may encounter spiritual and/or alien realms. DMT is the primary psychoactive compound in ayahuasca along with MAOI (monoamine oxidase inhibitors).

Feuerstein (2003) suggests that our spirituality is expressed through the body and we can relearn how to receive universal love energy through our bodies.

Spirituality, then, is not primarily about altered states of consciousness, however lofty and personally desirable they may be. It is about embodiment and grounding, or, as some theologians would put it, the incarnation of the spirit. The challenge is not to go out of the body but to realize that it is the temple of the sacred. (Feuerstein, 2003, p. 202)

I believe that the body is our subconscious mind and connection with our erotic body is integral to our spiritual health. In Western societies we have been indoctrinated to squelch our sexual desires or minimize them to a hormonal drive. Therefore, unawareness or denial of our erotic self can be considered a state of dis-ease. In my perspective remembering our erotic self requires a tenderizing of the body so it can blossom into its natural embodied aliveness. I feel there is a vital need to unveil sexual experiences from suppression and ignorance into the light of collective understanding and celebration.

Based on my own experience, I believe the co-created symbiotic relationship with plant teachers is able to offer plant drinkers a metamorphic process of purification, revitalization, and a remembrance of their erotic intelligence. Plant drinkers can experience a renewed sense of self, a heart opening, and a sensual integration within body, mind, and spirit. A heightened capacity to unite one's body in the material realm with the universal force in the subtle realm is possible. A plant drinker can then

meet their human and other-than-human lovers from a place of centeredness and empowerment.

Vegetalismo appeared to be a healing modality that included eroticism; this study assisted me in exploring this hypothesis. A guiding light that carried me through this research process was that the practice of vegetalismo held important lessons for guiding women's sexual/spiritual lives and possibly for future plant-facilitated psychotherapy for women who have experienced sexual trauma.

Description of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how erotic experiences with Amazonian plant teachers transformed the quality of women's sexual/spiritual lives. The focus was on female plant-drinkers who have had erotic experiences during ayahuasca ceremonies or plant diets, two practices within the vegetalismo tradition. In particular, this study focused on the vegetalismo practices of the Shipibo, an indigenous group in the Peruvian Amazon. The study was guided by the following questions: (a) What kind of erotic experiences may women have in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets?, and (b) how may these erotic experiences transform a woman's sexual/spiritual life? This investigation was qualitative using a heuristic methodology, and data was collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews with seven North American women aged 35-55. The study focused on individuals' description of their erotic experiences pertaining to energetic openings and unions

manifesting through somatic sensations, emotions, and visions that may include exchanges with physical and nonphysical beings. The participants' reports helped to uncover how plant teachers offered erotic experiences supporting an internal transformation of women's sexual/spiritual lives.

Definition of Key Terms

This section offers definitions of key terms as they were used in this research. The terms outlined are: shamanism, vegetalismo, plant teachers, plant diets, and eroticism.

Shamanism.

In the context of this study, *shamanism* is defined as an ancient tradition utilizing altered states of consciousness (ASC) to contact spirits and journey between worlds and dimensions of reality (Narby & Huxley, 2001). *Shamanic practices* involve diagnosing and curing illnesses, communicating with spirits and animals, soul retrieval, transforming positive and negative energies, and divination (Eliade, 1972). *Shamans* are healers in service of their community who seek to open, balance, and translate energy channels between individuals, groups, and the cosmic source (Halifax, 1979).

Vegetalismo.

This term refers to the shamanic mestizo tradition in the Peruvian Amazon where traditional healers, or *vegetalistas*, ingest plants and enter ASC with the intention of exploring heightened perceptions of nature, animals, and the spiritual world (Luna, 1984). *Ayahuasqueros*, a type of

vegetalista, specialize in the ritual use of ayahuasca as a means for channeling information from the spirit world. There are other vegetalista specialists such as *tabaqueros*, who use tobacco, and *perfumeros*, who use various fragrant plants such as *agua de florida* (flower water) (Beyer, 2009). The Shipibo-Conibo are an indigenous people in the Amazon rainforest in Peru who use plant teachers within the vegetalismo tradition for healing individuals (G. Arevalo, personal communication, July 1, 2009).³

Plant teachers. Believed to possess spirits that communicate with humans, *plant teachers* can be used to heal physical, emotional, and spiritual imbalances (Dobkin de Rios, 2005). One plant teacher venerated as the grandmother of the Amazonian plant world is *ayahuasca*, a traditional brew comprised of two plants: a vine (*Banisteropsis caapi*) and a leaf (*Psychotria viridis*). A number of other plants can be added to the brew to complement the effect of ayahuasca, such as *mapacho* or tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*), *toe* or Angel's Trumpet (*Brugmansia suavelolens*), and coca (*Erythroxylum coca*) (Castner, Timme, & Duke, 1998). There are dozens of plant teachers used in the practice of vegetalismo that communicate in different ways with the plant drinker depending on the physical, emotional, and mental state of the person and what type of

³ Guillermo Arevalo is a master Shipibo ayahuascero who has been practicing in Peru for approximately forty years. I participated in a three-month plant diet under his supervision in 2009 and was able to interview Arevalo about his expertise within the vegetalismo tradition.

healing they require (Campos, 2011). Each plant has a feminine and masculine energy, however, the perception of the dominant energy can vary depending on the particular plant drinker. Additionally, each plant can take on a motherly or fatherly role to balance the healing energy of the shaman (G. Arevalo, personal communication, July 1, 2009).

Examples of non-hallucinogenic native plants in Peru used are ajo sachá (*maniso alliacea*), boahuasca, coca (*erythroxylaceae*), and oje (*ficus anthelmintica*) (Castner et al., 1998). Ajo sachá contains several of the main sulfur compounds that garlic does and is well known in Peru for its medicinal properties. It is used for inflammation and pain of arthritis and for treating colds as well as to ward off evil spirits and to bring good luck. Boahuasca is used for inflammation and to heal cancer of the stomach, intestines, and ovaries. Coca is a mild stimulant that suppresses hunger and fatigue and is widely used in South America for digestive issues and altitude sickness. The alkaloid content of coca leaves is extremely low and requires a complex chemical process in order to produce cocaine. Oje is used for deep purifying and curing intestinal parasites and bacteria. It can be used to cleanse someone before they ingest ayahuasca. All of these plant teachers can be ingested alone or mixed into an ayahuasca brew (G. Arevalo, personal communication, August 1, 2009).

Plant diet. Within the vegetalismo tradition, the *plant diet* is comprised of daily ingestion of plant teachers (as described above); the elimination of salt, sugar, alcohol, and red meat (plus other particular

foods); and abstinence from sexual stimulation (G. Arevalo, personal communication, July 1, 2009). When people are dieting plants they are drinking the leaves, or roots, or flowers of plants that have been brewed into a liquid form. The time of day the plants are ingested (morning, afternoon, or evening) and the amount of liquid (one tablespoon to one cup) depends on the intention of the diet and the particular plant. The particular plant chosen by the vegetalista for a diet is one that is best suited to the needs of the individual. Each plant teacher works on many levels but can be more effective for certain issues. For instance, ajo sachá and pino blanco can be excellent cleansers on the physical and spiritual level. Marosa can be very effective with the emotional aspects of the heart (i.e., releasing grief and evoking compassion). Boahuasca can heal physical issues in the area of reproduction, and coca can be used for digestion and to enhance psychic vision.

The plant diet assists in achieving an ASC that fosters one's receptivity to plant teachings and transmission of power (Luna & Amaringo, 1991). A *healing diet* is for alleviating physical, mental, and spiritual ailments, and the more rigorous *apprenticeship diet* is for vegetalista training. Plant drinkers on both types of diets are supervised by a vegetalista, and the diets can range in duration from several days to several years. Traditional diets take place in isolation in the Amazonian jungle; however, a contemporary *social diet* created by a Shipibo vegetalista allows North Americans to diet in their home environment so

they can continue fulfilling their familial and work obligations. (G. Arevalo, personal communication, July 1, 2009).

Eroticism. *Eroticism* is defined in this study as the experience of a sexual/spiritual energetic opening or union that is experienced through bodily sensations, emotions, and visions. This may be experienced as a spiritual rebirth that could include an erotic connection between the plant drinker and physical beings such humans, animals, plants, trees, lakes, mountains, moon, planet, and stars, or an erotic connection between the plant drinker and nonphysical beings such as ancestors, deceased spirits, mythic and future beings, elves, giants, and Gods and Goddesses. For example, an erotic experience could be a sexual union with a mythic being during an ayahuasca ceremony or an erotic/spiritual union with an animal in dreamtime during a plant diet.

Relevance and Contributions of Study

There is an array of literature that suggests the connection between eroticism and plant teachers (Beyer, 2009; Campos, 2011; Cowan, 1995; Glass-Coffin, 1998; Metzner, 2006; Razam, 2010); however, no systematic or exploratory research on this phenomenon exists. Therefore, this study was relevant to further psychological understanding of how eroticism was experienced within the practice of *vegetalismo* and how these erotic experiences nurtured women's sexual/spiritual lives. The study highlighted for plant drinkers how they can explore their erotic nature in connection with the sacredness of their bodies and their

relationships with all beings. This study also provided consideration for how psychotherapists can work with women plant drinkers who have a history of sexual trauma.

It is impossible for me to ignore the heavily weighted male perspective of both practitioners and researchers and the disheartening lack of the female voice in the vegetalismo literature. This study offered a new approach in researching vegetalismo by using a heuristic research methodology that focused on women's experiences. The study also had elements of action-oriented research (Burns, 1999). The fact that the women participants were collaborative investigators whose reflective stories inspired transformational change in their own lives was in alignment with key features of action-oriented research (Burns, 1999).

This study also included feminist research components such as practicality and purposefulness (Given, 2008). The research was for and by women and the research questions and the purpose for knowing was focused on women's experiences within the vegetalismo tradition. The study was not conducted to gather knowledge for knowledge's sake but to inspire positive change for women's daily lives. For instance, the coresearchers' evaluative feedback may improve the practice of vegetalistas working with women in ayahwasca ceremonies and plant diets.

There is very little academic research on the vegetalismo practice of plant diets (Beyer, 2009; Luna, 2008) and this study contributes

information in this area. Additionally, a study focused on the North–South spiritual axis may spark further discussion on the cross-pollination of indigenous and non-indigenous cultures and how to maximize the healing potential of vegetalismo practices for spiritual seekers. A beneficial impact of this research was a strengthened sense of community amongst plant-drinkers and the renewed commitment to obtain information to keep them safe and thriving in ceremonial contexts. In summary, my hope is that this study further empowers the female voice and makes a contribution to academic research on vegetalismo.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This review of the literature begins with a brief discussion of shamanism and vegetalismo and follows with a more comprehensive discussion on plant diets and ayahuasca. Since the focus of the study is on vegetalismo practices within the Shipibo tradition, the practices of other South American traditions such as the Shuar in Ecuador and the Brazilian ayahuasca churches of the Santo Daime are not reviewed. A brief summary of the literature on eroticism, eroticism within vegetalismo, and the use of plant teachers in South America are outlined.

Shamanism

Shamanism is both an ethereal and a physical practice. One of the many definitions of shamanism that is relevant to this study is as a “collection of ecstatic methods organized in order to come into contact with the parallel, though invisible, universe of the spirits” (Eliade, 1972, p. 34). The relationship with nonphysical entities is important, as the shaman’s role is to maintain balance “in the relationships between the community and the gods or divine forces that direct the life of the culture” (Halifax, 1979, p. 21). The shaman’s task is to unite in order to transform, master positive and negative energies, and heal in service to the community (Llamazares, 2008). Within the shamanic cosmology, healing is viewed as a process of reconnecting to the vital source of life (Winkelman, 2000).

Some Western scholars have considered shamans to be the most up-to-date and knowledgeable psychologists (Narby & Huxley, 2001).

Shamans strengthen patients' ability to heal themselves by re-establishing their emotional and spiritual balance:

Shamans use metaphors—ways of thinking about one thing in terms of another—to describe a mythic world and to help the patient manipulate sensory, emotional, and cognitive information in a way that alters his or her perception of illness. (Tedlock, 2005, p. 15)

Vicki Noble (1991) states that

shamanic practices are those methods and techniques that awaken our natural instincts and impulses and then ground us in our bodies so that we can act from within. Shamans are grounded. They are not spacey or abstract in their approaches, but down to earth and concrete. (p. 65)

Shamans work on both the physical and subtle realms within their own body and the bodies of their patients thereby “expanding our concept of what a body is and relating to the body as an energy field composed both of spirit and matter” (Orenstein, 2003, pp. 5–6).

Shamanism can be thus understood as a visionary tradition and ancient practice utilizing ASC to contact spirits and journey between worlds and dimensions of reality (Krippner, 2000; Strassman, 2008). Shamans experience ASC through drumming, dance, dreaming, and ingesting plants known as entheogens such as peyote, mushrooms, ibogaine, and ayahuasca. *Entheogen*, meaning “God within,” is a modern term to define a substance used as a medicine/sacrament for religious and spiritual purposes (Ruck, Bigwood, Staples, Ott, & Wasson, 1979).

For thousands of years, ASC and entheogens have been an important pathway for humans to experience a personal connection with God and how

within all the world's major religious traditions, the direct experience of God (or the Absolute, the Sacred, the Ground of Being, or Cosmic Oneness) is seen as an essential stage of spiritual development. This occurs in states of unitive consciousness. (Forte, 2000, p. 145)

Many spiritual traditions use various hallucinogenic plants to commune with God, and scholars have speculated about their role in the very origin and development of religion (Merkur, 2001). In this spirit, Sjöö and Mor (1987) share how “the communal eating of hallucinogenic psilocybin was called the ‘body of Dionysus’ and the spotted scarlet flycap, *Amanita Muscaria*, was referred to as ‘Christ's body’ by Hebrew and early Christian cultists” (p. 121). Women in Ecuador brewed the “leaves, roots, and showy flowers of the tree *datura* into a tea for use during the menstrual and initiation rituals...and Mother Earth appears to them—both in daytime visions and night-time dreams” (Tedlock, 2005, p. 139).

Within the shamanic worldview, the soul is believed to leave the body and venture into the realm of the spirits during *dream-time*. Dream-time is a space of non-rational experience potentially filled with creativity and transformation. The interchange between physical reality and mystical forces occurs in dream-time and, according to Toro and Thomas (2007) is “seen as a means for renewing the union with mythical origins by means of the ancestors” (p. 17). Shamans understand the narrative language of

dreams “and the use of dreams to learn the cause of diseases and how to cure them (dream incubation)” (p. 17).

In dream-time one can speak with animals and is a space filled with spiritual symbolic imagery of shapes and light-form creations. Dreams illuminate current psychological states in which beliefs are highlighted in terms of how one is living a meaningful life. "Dreams are sources of revelation, and contain our personal mythologies. Most spiritual guides have developed numerous suggestions for listening to the language of dreams... Rituals embody our stories in symbol and action as well as in word and narrative" (Fischer, 1988, p. 11). According to Fischer (1988), “kataphatic” is defined as each person's ability to connect with God through images and symbols in dreams with the understanding that God and creation is similar. In this study dreaming while asleep is considered an ASC when teachings from the plant world can be transmitted. In the vegetalismo tradition, specific plants such as ayahuasca and tobacco are used to increase one's ability to receive transmissions in dream-time.

Vegetalismo

In the Peruvian Amazon, *vegetalismo*, is a term used to refer to the combination of indigenous and contemporary shamanism (mestizo); however, in the Brazilian religious groups vegetalismo refers to both indigenous and mestizo ayahuasca shamanism (Beyer, 2009). Mestizo shamans, called *vegetalistas*, have a proficient use of medicinal plants that contributes significantly to the physical and mental health of their

community (Luna & Amaringo, 1991). One type of vegetalista, *ayahuasqueros*, can receive intuitive knowledge and visions about plants with powerful healing properties through ingesting ayahuasca for the purpose of diagnosing and curing illnesses (Luna, 1986).

Ayahuasceros rely on *icaros*, songs that are learned from the plant spirits during periods of dieting, dream visions, and ayahuasca ceremonies (Beyer, 2009; Homan, 2011;) Luna, 1984). Chanting is identified as an essential musical technique used by shamans to facilitate ASC and mystical communications with spirits (Demange, 2002; Dobkin de Rios, 1984; Luna, 1986). Chanting is a shamanic power believed to shape and modify the visions and allow communication with the plant spirits; it is “a shaman’s most highly prized possession, the vehicles of his powers and the repositories of his knowledge” (Townesley, 2001, p. 267). Plant spirits work through the icaros to diagnose and treat illnesses believed to be caused by forest spirits or poison darts used in sorcery or black magic (Luna & Amaringo, 1991). A plant-drinker’s experience with icaros is viewed as an essential component of their healing process (Bustos, 2008).

A plant diet is required when working with plant teachers as a way of cleansing and preparing the body, mind, and spirit to open the healing energy of the plants (Luna & Amaringo, 1991). There are plant diets of different strictness and duration for ceremony participants, patients, and vegetalistas. One type of diet is for pre/post ayahuasca ceremonies that

can be two to seven days in duration, to decrease interference and increase one's receptivity to ayahuasca. A second type is a healing diet that can last from one week up to three months and is recommended for an individual who wants to heal physical, mental, and spiritual ailments. The more rigorous apprenticing diet is for vegetalista training and involves dieting and fasting for years in order to learn the *maraya*, *sumi*, and *banco* powers, which are the highest degrees of knowledge of the jungle, water, and sky realms (Luna & Amaringo, 1991). Traditionally it is thought to take 10 to 15 years (at minimum) of dieting many different plants to learn the basic tools necessary to be considered a skilled vegetalista (G. Arevalo, personal communication, June 1, 2009).

The intention during a diet is important with the realization that everything is a choice and one answers only to oneself and to the plant spirits. Beyer (2009) explains that the intention of the diet is to "maintain an ongoing connection and dialogue with the plant; to allow the plant to interact with the body, often in subtle ways; and to wait for its spirit to appear, as the spirit wishes, to teach and give counsel" (p. 60). During the diet there is transference of plant energy to the person dieting. Cleansing and recalibration of the senses are necessary so one can absorb the plant intelligence. Traditionally a dieter would be in isolation in the natural environment so that their senses became refined (Luna, 2008). The plants are the doorway between material and subtle energies and the dieter must

follow strict guidelines with respect and humility in order to be granted the passage through these portals.

It is important to acknowledge South American indigenous peoples as the legitimate experts of Amazonian plants and to recognize the challenge for those of us immersed within the North American cosmology of science and linear thinking to truly understand the vegetalismo cosmology. However, due to the increase of North American and European spiritual seekers desiring to drink ayahuasca (Fotiou, 2010), it is important that academics continue discussing the philosophical, ethical, and practical issues that arise. Ayahuasca tourism played a pivotal role in how the participants in this study were first introduced to ayahuasca. All of the women were able to initially sit in ayahuasca ceremonies because South American ayahuasceros offered their services to foreigners for a monetary exchange. Although ayahuasca tourism and the use of ayahuasca in modern Western contexts would be an interesting phenomenon to explore, these areas are beyond the scope of the study and therefore not discussed in the literature review. The study kept the focus on North American women's experiences of the plant teachers ingested in South American ceremonies.

Ayahuasca

Ayahuasca is a mixture of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* jungle vine and the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* bush. There is evidence that *Banisteriopsis* may have been used as early as 800 CE (Ogalde, Arriaza,

& Soto, 2009) and it is approximated that ayahuasca usage has occurred in 72 indigenous groups within South America (Luna, 1986). Ayahuasca is contemporarily used in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, western Brazil, and parts of Venezuela (Beyer, 2009). The Amazonian myth about the origin of ayahuasca (aka *yagé*) from the Quechua-speaking Kamsa and Inga people of southern Colombia is as follows:

At the beginning earth was obscurity. Men already existed, but they lacked intelligence. They took *yagé* and parted in half. For the women it gave menstruation, for the men the piece grew up and up to the sky....In the sky, they saw *yagé* entering an immense flower....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. (Shanon, 2002, p. 12)

Ayahuasca can be a catalyst for expanded awareness through challenging physical effects, powerful visions, and profound spiritual self-reflection.

“Each person brings a unique intention for drinking ayahuasca: for personal healing; spiritual uplift; enlightenment; insight and inner peace; connection or union with the cosmic consciousness, nature, or planet Earth; or to find creative energy. Others take it just to know” (Luna, 2008, p. 35).

Ritualized ayahuasca ceremonies led by skilled *vegetalistas* in South America was one of the *vegetalismo* practices focused on in this study. Generally, a ceremony lasts five to eight hours with anywhere between 4 to 40 plant-drinkers gathering in the *maloca* (ceremonial space) at night. The ceremonial aspects of set and setting include the role of facilitator, dieting, and intentions; the *set* is “the intentions, expectations,

and presuppositions of those participating in the ayahuasca session” (Luna, 2008, p. 112) and *setting* is “the concrete circumstances in which the action takes place, including the set of those in whose presence the ayahuasca is taken” (p. 112).

Safety measures are important in a ceremonial space—ritualized ceremonies offer the best way to structure the profound experiences induced by ayahuasca as they provide a safe container for both Western and non-Western participants (Luna, 2008). The community aspect of the ceremonial context is also pertinent, as a dynamic emerges where participants feel a strong sense of compassion for each other in the circle knowing that everyone is connected and ultimately “One” (Luna, 2008). Drinking within a ceremonial setting can bring community members into a more intimate and trusting relationship and increase community and social cohesion (Andritzky, 1989).

Ayahuasca is discussed as a healing plant by anthropologists and academics such as Harner (1973), Kalweit (1984), Luna (1986), McKenna (2004), Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies (MAPS, 1998), Narby, Kounen, and Ravalec (2010), and Naranjo (1973). The exploration of ayahuasca and other Amazonian plants may shed light on the therapeutic importance of integrating the mind, body, and spirit with respect to illness and health (Metzner, 1998). Among the most important uses of ayahuasca identified in the anthropological literature is its therapeutic capacity as both a diagnostic tool and a medicine in

determining the cause and cure of disease (Dobkin de Rios, 1984). For instance, research on using ayahuasca as a treatment for drug addiction has been conducted at the Takiwasi treatment centre in Tarapoto, Peru (Mabit, 2007). The “Hoasca Project,” involving an interdisciplinary research team investigating the physical and psychological effects of ayahuasca among long-time members of the Brazilian Uniao do Vegetal church, found that ayahuasca helped many participants quit using alcohol (Grob & Bravo, 1996). More of this kind of research is certainly warranted due to the number of practitioners interested in using this plant as a treatment (Strassman, 1995).

In addition, there have been many psychological studies on phenomenological ayahuasca experiences and the psychological effects on plant-drinkers in a variety of traditional and modern contexts (Bustos, 2008; Luna, 2008; Metzner, 2006; Shanon, 2002; Trichter, 2007). Themes that are common in ayahuasca experiences include individual or personal (i.e., autobiographical content), humanistic (e.g., morality or death), species-specific (i.e., relating to homo sapiens), supra-human (i.e., astral), and creationist (i.e., pertaining to mythic origins or evolution (Shanon, 2002). These categories of experience are helpful in understanding the plant drinkers’ accounts of relating with non-physical beings in the subtle realm.

Plant Teachers and Spiritual Intelligence

In this study, I accepted the belief that plant teachers can nurture women's sexual/spiritual well being and researched from the assumption that this was essential to the health of one's psyche and personal relationships. Spirituality "reconnects us with the experience of the sacred; it restores our trust in an order that includes us and our feeling of belonging to a more comprehensive web, thus dissipating fear and the ghosts of loneliness and anguish" (Oxford, 2006, p. 25). Spiritual teaching provides support for one's spiritual journey to gain greater self-knowledge and understanding of one's interrelatedness with all of creation (Guenther, 1992). "The spiritual search is the underpinning of all other activity, and that spiritual truth is revealed to us to the degree we are willing to use it in our life for others" (Bays, 2002, p. 127). The sacred relationship between the plant teacher, the plant drinker, and spirit can be an agent of transformation and create a pathway for a deep level of healing. "By letting ourselves be known to each other and to our deepest selves can we have the assurance that we are known by God" (Guenther, 1992, p. 46).

Many authors have written about plants as intelligent teachers (Harpignies, 2007; Luna & Amaringo, 1991; Narby, 1998; Shanon, 2002) and ayahuasca as "an effective tool to attain understanding and wisdom" (Tupper, 2002, p. 502). Plant teachers develop one's ability to experience ASC, suggesting that physical reality is embedded in a multidimensional reality and "that there is not a distinction between real and not real, rather

that there are layers of realities, with different ways of knowing at each level" (Kerr & McAlister, 2000, p. 53). Plants are wise teachers who decide, at times with the unknowing participation of the person, what one should experience and learn in each session. They are teachers like

the wind at night rushing right through you and totally changing you but leaving everything unchanged, even your greatest weaknesses; blowing away every idea of what you thought you were and leaving you as you always have been, since the beginning. (Kingsley, 1999, p. 191)

Plant teachers develop one's ability to experience heightened states of consciousness that is defined as a characteristic of spiritual intelligence by Emmons (2000). Spiritual intelligence is being aware that the physical reality is embedded in a multidimensional reality (K. Noble, 2000). Kerr and McAlister (2000) explain "that there is not a distinction between real and not real, rather that there are layers of realities, with different ways of knowing at each level" (p. 53). The plants can show aspects of shamanic cosmology, as outlined by Lllamarares (2008): understanding the laws of the universe and humanness, restoring balance both internally in their psyche and externally in the world, connecting with the earth to ground their spiritual journey, adopting a respectful relationship with all living species, and finally maintaining a strong spiritual connection. For instance, ayahuasca drinkers learn to journey through the lower world of the shadow, middle world of the physical, and the upper world of the celestial light. The plant teachers assist in opening the

energetic channels within the plant drinker allowing earthly and heavenly energies to unite.

Spiritual intelligence is also the conscious pursuit of individual and community health (K. Noble, 2000). One could postulate that within the vegetalismo cosmology plants assist vegetalistas to heal individuals and communities because the plants are viewed as intelligent teachers and healers. Ayahuasceros use ayahuasca as a tool to diagnose physical, emotional, and spiritual imbalances within individuals and between family members and community members. People choose to drink ayahuasca for healing such issues as disease and addiction. Amazonian indigenous communities and Brazilian churches both recognize the valuable spiritual experiences that occur when drinking ayahuasca (Shanon, 2002). An ayahuasca drinker in a ceremony describes how ayahuasca can offer spiritual teachings:

Ayahuasca taught me, or is just beginning to teach me, my most important role in the world, being a teacher and a student. ... I felt a deep and personal connection with everyone, and wanted to be caring toward all the beings of the world. I have not had as deeply spiritual of an experience before. (Trichter, 2007, p. 74)

Plant Teachers and Spiritual Guidance

Spiritual guidance is given through diverse forms, and plant teachers are one form of spiritual guidance. Each plant teacher has unique strategies for guiding the plant drinker. Health is closely connected with the opportunity to be heard and witnessed lovingly as well as the awareness of one's relationship with all beings and God. The spiritual

guidance from plant teachers can provide deeper insight into one's perception of "self." The spiritual practice of connecting with plant spirits can become a foundation upon which plant drinkers can transform fear and self-doubt into trust and clarity.

I hypothesize that the spiritual guidance of ayahuasca in a ceremony can be understood through Guenther's (1992) four stages of a spiritual re-birth; the first stage, the transition stage, the active work stage, and the celebration stage. In the "first stage" it is extremely important that there is a safe physical and emotional space as sacred container for the laborer (i.e., plant drinker). This first stage requires mindfulness that Klein (1995) says "allows one to become centered in one's changing self, it is both a physical and mental grounding, and this grounding is the beginning of constructive personal strength" (p. 82).

Mindfulness allows for the space in choosing how one reacts holding the emotion in awareness without acting it out and surrendering to one's spiritual rebirth (Fischer, 1988). For example, a plant drinker requires mindfulness that begins only after one clears a channel for spirit by surrendering to the creative process, and maintaining a spiritual practice such as meditation to support the necessary patience and perseverance to continue on during the ceremony. Both active meditation and surrendering to the plant's work are essential to maximize the benefits of drinking ayahuasca. The ability to dance between these two ways of

relating with the plant teacher strengthens as one gains more experience in ceremonies.

The “transition stage” requires patience, being comfortable in the silence, and waiting in the unknown (Guenther, 1992). There can be a heightened sense of intensity, feelings of confusion and surprise, as well as creativity. Plant drinkers have to wait in the unknown which may be accompanied by great discomfort. Guenther (1992) articulates that “waiting can be the most intense and poignant of all human experiences—the experience which, about all others, strips us of affectation and self-deception and reveals to use the reality of our needs, our values, and ourselves” (p. 95). There is a sense of no turning back because something indescribable is shifting and one will never be the same as before. The stage can be painfully experienced as a heightened sense of loss in leaving behind a safe and known way of being like a snake shedding its skin. This is also a time when the plant drinker is pregnant with creativity (and sometimes nausea) and gestates in a space of the unknown that encompasses infinite possibilities.

The “active work stage” is when one finds his or her discipline (what one loves to follow) and spiritual practices to move forward (Guenther, 1992). The plant drinker is leading the way with great energy and determination and the plant guide encourages them to continue on. The term “sacred remembering” which I define as the awareness that one is love and always in connection with spirit. Ayahuasca can reflect sacred

remembering to the plant drinker. When one embodies clarity, calmness, and confidence it serves as a reminder of the complete peace that one feels when s/he simply remembers who they have always been and will always be.

The “celebration stage” is a re-birth and a time of gratitude for what one has had the courage to go through in order to reclaim a life of deep nourishment (Guenther, 1992). The re-birth process is analogous to V. Nobel’s (1991) description of transformation as

an ongoing shedding of false selves in favor of the active development of more authentic forms of expression. If a woman can begin to appreciate and cultivate the value of an identity that is always changing, continually in flux, never completely solid, she begins to align with what shamans and Buddhists describe as "reality." The rest of the work is practicing to become able to accept and tolerate this vision of reality, which is in conflict with the one we were originally taught to believe. (p. 71)

Plant drinkers are aware of the inter-connectedness of how they form their life and how they are being formed by their life as well as how spirit can be present in their life on a daily basis. The term “sacred emptiness” became apparent to me during this stage. Within sacred emptiness attitudes can be transformed from its shadow into light with the intention of love, compassion, and the realization of the true nature of self. The more internal space there exists for self-compassion the more space there is to have compassion for others. Compassion is possible with the recognition that the individual and collective shadow stems from a fear that we are not worthy beings. Plant drinkers in ayahuasca ceremonies may have the

opportunity to remember that they are innate worthy beings and have greater compassion for the times when they and others forget this truth.

Eroticism and Shamanism

The phenomenon of erotic experiences with Amazonian plant teachers has not yet been examined in the academic research on vegetalismo; therefore, this study ventured into new territory. This study focused on women's sexual/spiritual experiences during an ayahuasca ceremony or plant diet. My definition of an erotic experience may include energetic openings and unions that are experienced through bodily sensation, emotions, and visions or spiritual rebirth.

In this section I first discuss the term *eroticism*, then give examples of eroticism within shamanism and the use of plants for sexual health in South America. Although I tried to be as thorough as possible in covering the most important works applicable to this study, I make no claims to have exhausted the vegetalismo literature. In addition, the study of ancient traditions (spiritual, religious, and mystic) that work with sexual energy (e.g., tantra) was beyond the scope of this study.

The word *eroticism* is derived from Eros, the god of sexual love and beauty in Greek mythology. Eros was the son of Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality, who directed the force of love in mortals (Miles & Norwich, 1997). Eroticism has been understood in diverse ways throughout history, from the Platonic view of the erotic as the ideal beauty between bodies and pleasure, to Freud's theory of the "libido" as the

combination of human sexual drive and life force (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1989). Eroticism offers multiple and interacting aspects including symbolic, narrative, evocative, political, connective, healing, and transcendent (Morin, 1995). An erotic experience is “founded in a deep recognition of the unity of life that is celebrated in the act of love, whether sexual or erotic in the larger sense” (Feuerstein, 2003, p. 205). A holistic and integrated definition of eroticism is “the power of our primal interrelatedness...as it creates and connects hearts, involves the whole person in relationships or self-awareness, vulnerability, openness, and caring” (Brock, 1988, p. 211). McIntyre’s (2012) perspective on how sexuality and eros are connected is helpful as well:

Sexuality is not a thing, an act, or a behavior, but rather a state of being who you are, what your nature is. And it is bound tightly to creativity....It is given from Eros—the God of sexual passion, that longing for the divine, and it is the instinctive drive to connect to the larger world—and when Eros is made part of all that we do, all that we do becomes alive, enhanced, and animated. (pp. 31–32)

Sacred and transcendental sexual experiences can be placed under the umbrella of eroticism. Sacred sexuality encompasses multidimensional layers of intimate love relationships within the communal, environmental, and spiritual realms (Ogden, 2006). This sacred union expands the perception of sexual desire and intimate love with nature and the cosmos to being a portal to the Divine. Transpersonal psychologists suggest that when humans are no longer limited to subject-object based perception that there is a potential for unitive or non-dual awareness; “The coming together of object and subject is an act of love that involves an

ontological shift from isolated being to expanded inter-being (Puhakka, 2000, p. 21). Theorists in ecopsychology contribute to the discussion believing it is possible for humans to have intimate unions with other-than-human beings like trees, the ocean, and the Earth (Roszak, 2001). One research study suggests that five percent of people living in the United States may have had transcendental sexual experiences where, for example, they united with an animal spirit or with Gaia (earth) (Wade, 2004). However, many of the research participants “were delighted but confused by their experiences, and they felt they had nowhere to turn for a sympathetic hearing, least of all to their lovers or spiritual advisor” (Wade, 2004, p. 9).

Shamanic sexuality has positively impacted the concept of eroticism and one anthropologist daringly went so far to say that, “the sexual element was the primary factor in the origins and development of shamanism” (Sternberg, 1925, p. 77). There is also a proliferation of literature on sacred sexual practices such as neo-tantric yoga that focuses on the connection between self and other (Deida, 2007; Khaisa, 2009; Taylor, 2009), however, shamanic sexuality may extend the definition of sacred sexuality to include the sensual connection with nature and spirit and the sexual union with nonphysical entities. The most prevalent erotic relationship in shamanic literature is the “spirit lover,” who is an essential helper along the path of being a healer. The Shuar people in Ecuador tell stories of men who obtain power by having sex with *tsunki* women, the

shamanically potent underwater people (Perruchon, 2004). There are also stories of Amazonian shamans having ritualized sex with deities manifesting as animals (e.g., jaguars) to gain shamanic powers (Macedo, 2007; Silva, 2004). Also, one painting of an ayahuasca vision called *The Three Powers* depicts dolphins and mermaids riding on serpents who are known to seduce humans for their sexual purposes, one being to reproduce children (Luna & Amaringo, 1991).

Marriages between shamans and their nonphysical spirit lovers, involve intense commitment, passion, and erotic merges and these relationships can be as intimate, unpredictable, and psychologically fulfilling as any human relationship (Tedlock, 2005). Plant spirits can be very jealous about sexual relations between humans, and a shaman may need to be sexually abstinent with humans to maintain a sexual alliance with the plant spirit. The anthropologist Lagrou tells the story of a Cashinahua woman shaman who married a snake spirit and could no longer have sex with her husband in order to successfully heal fever in children (as cited in Whitehead & Wright, 2004).

Eroticism and Plant Teachers

There are many ancient spiritual traditions that incorporate rituals using plants and herbs, such as the Vedic *soma* (inner nectar of immortality) ceremonies using *Nymphaea* (water lilies) and *Nelumbo* (lotus plant) to maintain the stability of the cosmos, order, fertility, and life on earth (Spess, 2000). Also, it has been postulated that in ancient Greece

priestesses practiced “vaginal fumigation” (Rigoglioso, 2009, p. 51) using plant vapors to induce conception known as “virgin births” (p. 51).

Although a discussion on the diverse ways plants were used in the areas of sexuality and fertility would be interesting, I maintained focus on Amazonian plant teachers.

Amazonian plants are used in South America in the areas of sex, love, and reproduction. The various plants available for sale in Peruvian markets to enhance male sexual potency include *Levántate Pájaro Muerto* (Arise Dead Bird); *Siete Veces Sin Sacar* (Seven Times Without Pulling Out); and *Tumba Hembra* (Knock Her Over). A *pusanguera*, one type of vegetalista who uses plants for love potions, rubs a *buceta* potion onto a woman’s vagina to cause intense pleasure for the male partner during intercourse (Beyer, 2009). Also, annual maca festivals, honoring maca as an aphrodisiac food, take place in towns such as Churin, Peru. The plant *piri piri* is used for reproductive health to assist women with menstruation, infertility, miscarriages, pregnancy, and pain-free labor and deliveries (Chuquimbalqui, personal communication, June 1, 2009)⁴. The plant *boahuasca* is used to heal female reproductive organs, and coca leaves—known to be an aphrodisiac—are chewed for calcium by mothers who are nursing their babies. Also, some Santo Daime church members drink

⁴ Sonia Chuquimbalqui is a Shipibo vegetalista and previous spouse of G. Arevalo. During my three-month plant diet in 2009 at Espiritu de Anaconda I interviewed her about women’s healing from the perspective of Shipibo vegetalismo.

ayahuasca during pregnancy and labor, and newborns may be given a drop of ayahuasca to initiate their connection with the sacrament they will drink when they are young adults (Cemin, 2006; Labate, 2011).

The energy of ayahuasca has been reported as having an erotic quality. The metaphor of sex has been used to describe ayahuasca as “juices and hormones of plant chemicals and essential essences. It’s the sex of the world and its being milked to connect with the cosmic orgasm of the spirit world” (Razam, 2009, p. 91). The metaphor of birth has also been utilized explaining that

when we are in the womb of our mothers, we are connected to the placenta, which is for us the universe. When we are born, the umbilical cord is cut. Yage is a new umbilical cord connecting us to the universe. (Luna as cited in Strassman, 2008, p. 101)

According to Shanon (2002), ayahuasca drinkers commonly feel sensuous with everything in their environment including plants and trees, and ayahuasca is thought to support people in developing more than purely orgasm-orientated sexual behaviors. In a discussion about how plant teachers actually work to heal people one ayahuascero explains how

the plants always go to the first chakra. It moves that energy, the kundalini energy which is incredibly powerful. You can feel the surge going up your spine, and then it blossoms like a lotus flower. That's your sexual power. (Campos, 2011, p. 106)

Chapter 3: Methodology

The goal of qualitative research is to reveal the deeper truth of a phenomenon, allowing for the rich illumination of an experience, and to gain “the meaning and essence in significant human experience” (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40). Qualitative research aims at attaining full description and appreciation for a particular phenomenon using a small sample size; this goal contrasts with quantitative research, which aims at obtaining a generalised understanding about objective phenomena in order to explain, predict, and control them (Given, 2008). Quantitative methods are useful to show causal relationships and to eliminate individual points of view. Using a qualitative method focuses on subjective, individual accounts from an emic point of view, meaning the view of those who live it (Braud & Anderson, 1998). Since this study attempted to gain insight into women’s subjective experiences during ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets, a qualitative method was chosen.

Rationale and Description of the Research Method

A qualitative approach that uncovers the meaning of a particular phenomenon, *heuristic research* “is a way of engaging in scientific search through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 15). It is a quest for self-exploration, self-dialogue, and self-discovery that is grounded in the individual’s lived experience. Moustakas (1990) states, “as the inquiry

expands, such self-knowledge enables one to develop the ability and skill to understand the problem more fully, and ultimately to deepen and extend the understanding through the eyes and voices of others” (p. 17). A key skill for qualitative analysis is “heuristic indwelling” (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 45) that “stresses the participatory nature of tacit knowing...involves sifting through and interpretation of data and...offers the possibility of a specific methodological tool within qualitative research” (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 45).

A heuristic approach is appropriate for psychological research as it honors participants’ subjective experience. For the present study, the heuristic emphasis on personal understanding of the subjective internal experience is particularly well suited for investigating erotic experiences that can be very intimate and self-revealing. In addition, a heuristic approach encourages patience and trust in the conscious and unconscious process of self-transformation. Empathetic listening is required on the part of the researcher to understand the form, process, and presence of the content presented, allowing the research process to unfold naturally (Heron & Reason, 1997). The method of gathering data most commonly is the informal conversational interview that relies on an unveiling process through dialogue. “Dialogue involves cooperative sharing in which coresearchers and the primary researchers open pathways to each other for explicating the phenomenon being

investigated. This means receiving the other as a partner, accepting and affirming the other person” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47).

According to Moustakas (1990) one aspect that distinguishes heuristic research from other qualitative approaches is the greater personal involvement of the researcher in the process: The researcher is encouraged to include insights from his or her own somatic knowing, feelings, intuition, dreams, and artistic expressions. Moustakas (1990) explains that the researcher is “searching for qualities, conditions, and relationships that underlie a fundamental question, issue, or concern...and may be entranced by visions, images, and dreams that connect the researcher to their quest” (p. 11). The recognition of alternate ways of knowing arguably allows for greater depth and scope in exploring the topic. This method fosters a self-understanding and personal growth that guides the process enabling me, as the researcher, to integrate my entire being into the research process.

The Six Phases of Heuristic Research

The heuristic research study involved six phases: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990). In the initial engagement phase the study’s focus was clarified. This was a topic that I desired to investigate with deep involvement and intensity. The entire heuristic research process was guided by the research question.

During the second phase, immersion, I was able to become intimately involved with the research question. The research question in the heuristic inquiry was illuminated by “self-dialogue” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23) where I shifted between the experience and conceptualizing the experience. The immersion process involved self-dialogue and self-searching that was based on tacit and intuition information. Moustakas (1990) defined intuition as “utilizing an internal capacity to make inferences and arrive at a knowledge of underlying structures or dynamics” (p. 23) and tacit knowledge as “a capacity that allows one to sense the unity or wholeness of something from an understanding of the individual qualities or parts” (p. 20).

Everything that the researcher encounters from every dimension of life can help to illuminate the research question. Moustakas (1990) elaborates saying “virtually anything connected with the question becomes raw material for immersion, for staying with, and for maintaining a sustained focus and concentration” (p. 28). Perseverance was required during this stage to remain focused on the research question for an extended period of time as well as inner attention to discover the central meanings.

The third phase, incubation, was when I created space away from the research question. “During this process the researcher is no longer absorbed in the topic in any direct way or alert to things, situations, events, or people that will contribute to an understanding of the

phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). During this time of retreat the tacit and intuitive knowledge were able to fully maximize their ability to bring information from the subconscious to conscious awareness. “The incubation process gives birth to a new understanding or perspective that reveals additional qualities of the phenomenon, or a vision of its unity” (p. 29). The fourth phase, illumination, was when themes emerged from the research question that included clarifications of misunderstandings or uncovers hidden meanings. “Illumination opens the door to a new awareness, a modification of an old understanding, a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, or an altogether new discovery of something that has been present for some time yet beyond immediate awareness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 30). There was an emotional connection and universal significance made to the research question.

In the fifth phase, explication, the individual depictions, individual portraits, and the composite depiction were created. The individual depictions and portraits of coresearchers of the chosen phenomenon were comprised of detailed description, direct quotations, and case documentation that showcase the essence of the participant’s experience. I was assisted through this phase by focusing, self-searching, and self-disclosure. The process is a time “to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning. Numerous heuristic approaches are utilized in pursuing a full elucidation of

the descriptive qualities and themes that characterize the experience being investigated” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31).

The sixth and final phase was the creative synthesis when the researcher integrates all the research components and core themes in a unique presentation. The creative synthesis reflected my response to the phenomenon and is the outcome of my pursuit of knowledge. The creative synthesis could “take the form of a poem, song, narrative description, a story or tale, or a combination of these” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 198).

Research Participants and Recruitment Procedures

Coresearchers were selected for a purposeful and small sample of seven individuals: “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). Participants were selected based on the following considerations:

1. They were adult females over the age of 21 living in North America.
2. They participated in ayahuasca ceremonies in Peru that were facilitated by a traditional Shipibo vegetalista.
3. They were experienced plant-drinkers who had participated in at least 30 ayahuasca ceremonies and completed a minimum of one three-month plant diet.

4. They were well known to me by having previously participated together in ayahuasca ceremonies prior to the conception of this research project.
5. They had erotic experiences with Amazonian plant teachers.
6. They were not using psychotropic medications and have not experienced suicidal ideation or psychiatric disorders within the last three years.
7. They were willing to participate in the research project as it is designed.

These inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully chosen. My professional work as a counselor has been in the area of women's reproductive health, and I therefore designed this study to continue exploring through a female lens by having female coresearchers and focusing on women's health. Woman plant-drinkers had experiences with plants that supported female health issues such as menstruation, miscarriages, pregnancies, and birth.

Focusing on North American plant-drinkers enabled the study to explore how vegetalismo practices are experienced by non-indigenous people. Due to the illegality of ayahuasca in North America, the interviews were based on ayahuasca ceremonies that took place in Peru, where it is considered legal for adults. Research participants were over the age of 21 so they are considered adults by Peruvian law. Several of the plant diets involved plants that are not illegal in North America; therefore, data were

collected about plant diets that were completed in either North or South America.

The study focused exclusively on Shipibo ayahuasca ceremonies, as it was my belief that ritualized ceremonies with traditional *vegetalistas* offered the best context for drinking ayahuasca. The category of “experienced” plant-drinker was based on participation in at least thirty ayahuasca ceremonies and completion of at least one diet of three-month duration in North America. During the diet the coresearchers ingested a particular plant teacher on a daily basis while eliminating salt, sugar, alcohol, and red meat (plus other particular foods) as well as abstaining from sexual stimulation. Their diets were supervised by a skilled *vegetalista* who also opened and closed their diets during an ayahuasca ceremony. The experienced plant-drinker criterion increased the likelihood that coresearchers had navigated through intense experiences in an ASC and could recall their erotic experiences in interviews. The more practice a coresearcher had in relationship with ayahuasca, the more discrimination she was able to have; this discrimination was necessary in a study that focused specifically on eroticism. Completing a plant diet, as a key practice in *vegetalismo*, increased coresearchers’ knowledge and ability to speak about various plants that led to insights about eroticism.

I had previously participated in ayahuasca ceremonies with all of the coresearchers, therefore, it was easy to contact them for the research study. The letter (Appendix A) explaining the research project, selection

criteria, and the necessary steps to participate were emailed, and interested participants emailed me directly. I made phone contact with potential participants to explain the research project and assess for eligibility criteria. Once the seven participants were selected, they were given the Participation Consent Form (Appendix B) and Bill of Rights (Appendix C). A mutually agreed-upon time and place for the interview were arranged with the understanding that I would travel to the participant's location. Two coresearchers lived in Canada and five in the United States, so the interviews took place in six different cities within North America. Four of the seven interviews were conducted in the participant's home, one in the participant's work office, and two in a naturalistic setting. It took approximately nine months to complete all the interviews due to the coresearchers' schedules and the travel time required of me. The coresearchers were European-Americans, however, in order to protect their privacy no other demographic information was shared other than in the individual portraits of two coresearchers.

Data Collection

Seven participants were interviewed about their erotic experiences with Amazonian plant teachers. Data were collected from two interviews, and written consent was obtained for the interview, the recording, and the use of data. The informal conversational interview was chosen as the format for the data collection. "Dialogue is the preferred approach in that it aims toward encouraging expression, elucidation, and disclosure of the

experience being investigated” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47). I used the interview guideline incorporating the formerly established research questions, however, I was flexible to allow space for spontaneous questions in response to the coresearchers’ statements.

The first interview was at least one hour and up to one-and-a-half hours in duration, semi-structured with a number of open-ended questions. The open-ended interview technique increased the compatibility of responses, assured that the data was complete for each participant, and facilitated the analysis of data (Moustakas, 1990). The intention of the first interview was to obtain a description of the coresearcher’s erotic experiences in an ayahuasca ceremony or plant diet. The introduction phase of the interview created rapport and a safe environment for the participants. I clarified the purpose of the research and stated that if strong emotions arose for the participant, professional counseling sessions would be available. The purpose sentence I used was, “The purpose of this study is to investigate the erotic experiences of women in ayahuasca and plant diets.” I then explained confidentiality, participant’s rights, and answered any questions the participant had about these or other issues pertaining to the study.

When there were no more questions, I began the main body of the interview using the following central research questions:

1. Describe an erotic experience you have had in an ayahuasca ceremony or during a plant diet.

2. Describe, if any, your intentions of healing a sexual or reproductive issue in an ayahausca ceremony or a plant diet (on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level).
3. In what ways, if any, has an erotic experience with a plant teacher changed your life (on a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level)?
4. Describe, if any, an erotic experience that was challenging in an ayahausca ceremony or plant diet.

In addition to these central questions I also asked the following questions: What have Amazonian plants taught you about eroticism? How do plant teachers work in ceremonies and diets? Why are plant diets an essential practice in vegetalismo?

The second interview, lasting no longer than one hour, gave coresearchers the opportunity to elaborate on the research questions and assure that the transcripts and individual depictions accurately captured their experience. Each coresearcher was given her transcript and individual depictions before the second interview so she could review them, and use the interview to give feedback. I encouraged coresearchers to offer their artistic expressions such as artwork and poetry that they created before or during the data-collection process.

My intention was to create a trusting atmosphere during the interviews that supported the comfort of each coresearcher, and perhaps my counseling training was helpful. I periodically asked the coresearchers

if they were comfortable and had everything they needed as the interview proceeded. I was mindful to enter into the interview process as open-minded as possible while holding my biases, assumptions, and beliefs to the side. I evoked empathetic listening skills in order to place focused attention on the coresearchers. The interviews were taped and I did not take any notes during the process. The interviews ended once the coresearcher felt she had answered the research questions to the extent of her desire.

It is possible that because the coresearchers were previously known to me there was a greater level of trust that facilitated gathering this type of data. Prior to the research study the coresearchers and I were in ayahuasca ceremonies together in Peru with a Shipibo vegetalista. During these ceremonies there was a sense of humility and sisterhood created between us as we journeyed through the various dimensions the best we knew how. I shared my own erotic and spiritual stories with the coresearchers before and during the research process. I, as the primary researcher, dedicated time to collect their stories, however, I emphasized to each coresearcher that their insight was precious in expanding knowledge in the field of vegetalismo.

Negative side effects were not expected; however, if a coresearcher experienced discomfort as a consequence of participating in the interview session, I was available to talk with her after the interview or provide her with the contact information of a local psychotherapist for

support. There were no coresearchers who expressed discomfort after the interviews; however, I still contacted them by phone and email to see if they had any questions or concerns. All identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts and audiotapes; in addition, audiotapes were kept in a secure place to which only I had access. I recorded and transcribed each interview myself, and each interviewee was given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

I followed the seven steps of data analysis outlined by Moustakas (1990). In Step 1, the data was transcribed from the audio-recordings and reviewing notes. I then immersed myself in the material until the essence of each coresearcher's experience was understood in its details and as a whole (Step 2). During this step, I was attentive to dreams and other forms of tacit knowledge that illuminated the research questions and the data. During Step 3, I reviewed the material and identified qualities and themes emerging from the individual depictions to show the coresearcher's experience and essential elements of the phenomenon. I then returned to the original data (Step 4) to ensure that the depiction was in alignment with the data and contained the themes essential to the phenomenon. In Step 5, these depictions were given to each coresearcher for evaluation; during the second interview, the coresearcher had the opportunity to correct or clarify the depictions. I then made changes to the individual depictions according to the coresearchers feedback. The coresearchers

were guided through the data collection stage solely based on two interviews. I remained focused on the research question investigating the erotic experiences of women in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets and did not include additional questions to assess their experiential process of being involved in the research study. The coresearchers also stayed focused on the research question and did not deviate from the planned stages of the interviews.

Once the previous five steps were completed with each coresearcher, I gathered all the individual depictions to create a group depiction that captured the essence of the experience of the whole group. This step is when “core themes and essences that permeate the experience of the entire group of coresearchers are understood and a universal depiction is constructed” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 68). I then selected two participants who clearly exemplified at least three of the core themes to create the individual portraits. The raw material of the interviews was used to present a portrait of the individual that was holistic and alive. Then the composite depiction emerged and included narratives, accounts, conversations, and excerpts in the coresearcher’s own words that gave life and vividness to the phenomenon. Each of the two portraits highlighted the essence of their individual experience as well as representing the essential aspects of the group as a whole. The portraits were constructed based on the primary researcher’s perception of the coresearcher’s accounts at the time of the data analysis. If these assumptions, biases and

perceptions shifted over time perhaps a different portrait would have been created.

The final step involved presenting a creative synthesis that included the themes and essential meanings of the phenomenon investigated. I was guided to follow my intuitive response to eroticism and plant teachers and included dreams, songs, and artwork to illustrate the creative synthesis.

Moustakas's (1990) summarizes the heuristic process as being one that can be hurried or timed by the clock or calendar. It demands the total presence, honesty, maturity, and integrity of a researcher who not only strongly desires to know and understand but is willing to commit endless hours of sustained immersion and focused concentration on one central question, to risk the opening of wounds and passionate concerns, and to undergo the personal transformation that exists as a possibility in every heuristic journey. (p. 14)

Standards of Quality and Verification

In this heuristic research, validity was based on capturing the meaning of the phenomenon under study. One way to assure validity was by reviewing the data to confirm that the essential elements were represented in the depictions. The second interview acted as a validity check so the coresearchers could assess the accuracy of their individual depictions with regard to their experience.

Due to the nature of a heuristic study it was not possible to argue that I as the researcher was completely objective and had no influence on the research validity. Therefore, I disclosed my own feelings about the

subject matter as openly as possible in the “My Heuristic Process” section. To facilitate this disclosure process I kept a journal throughout the research process about the biases, expectations, predispositions, and sensitivities that surfaced for me. Hopefully, my own self-disclosure helped to create a trusting space for a depth of self-disclosure from coresearchers that assisted in capturing their experience.

Delimitations and Limitations

There were three delimitations in this study. First, the study focused on Amazonian plants used for healing within the vegetalismo tradition in Peru and excluded plants used within other spiritual traditions (e.g. san pedro, peyote, and mushrooms). Second, the study examined the vegetalismo practices of the Shipibo and therefore excluded other South American communities that use ayahuasca for healing purposes (e.g., the Shuar in Ecuador) or as a sacrament in religious rituals (e.g., the Santo Daime church in Brazil). Third, the study investigated only experiences of North American plant drinkers who had participated in ayahuasca ceremonies in Peru. Limitations to this study existed in five areas. First, regarding the selection of participants, generalizability was not possible due to the limited sample of females and would not be representative of all plant drinkers. Second, regarding discrimination of erotic experiences, it may have been difficult for some coresearchers to articulate in detail their erotic experiences based in an ASC that occurred months or years in the past. Third, my interpretation of the account may have also been colored

by my own experience. Fourth, although the particular ayahuascero leading the ceremony or supervising the plant diet could have influenced the coresearcher's experience of eroticism, the role of the vegetalista was not explored in the study. Fifth, the study focused on the coresearcher's experience with plant teachers and did not expand the investigation to the coresearcher's experience of being involved in the heuristic research study itself.

My Heuristic Process

The heuristic research process involved six phases: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990). The initial engagement stage began in 2005 when I first communed with ayahuasca. I realized during the process of writing this methodology chapter how ayahuasca seduced me to this research topic upon the initial sip. During my first ceremony, I experienced a common phenomenon of energetically merging with the serpent spirit of ayahuasca. "Among the Shipibo-Conibo of Peru, a great serpent is believed to be the mother of all visions, which she keeps in her skin. Very often, people experience these serpents as benevolent teachers or as primordial mothers" (Forte, 2000, p. 136). In shamanic cosmology inside the serpent is "the most sacred place on earth, a place of refuge, the creative womb from which all things were born and to which all things returned...the destiny of human kind is to be devoured by the Serpent" (Anzaldúa, 1989, p. 82). Over the next year as I continued to drink

ayahuasca the serpent visions became more prevalent in ceremonies and dream-time. The serpent became my spiritual guide when my partner died suddenly at the age of 34. After my relationship with the serpent transformed from one based on fear to an ally, I experienced a kundalini awakening. It was validating to discover through many conversations with plant drinkers and accounts in the vegetalismo literature (Beyer, 2009; Campos, 2011; Metzner, 2006) that people frequently experience kundalini energy openings.

In 2007 I had the vision of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco during an ayahuasca ceremony. I was involved in a blossoming romantic relationship, lived in a gorgeous home in Vancouver, and had a invigorating and financially secure job as a counselor in the hospital system—but my heart was longing for something. In ceremony it was clear that I was in a spiritual crisis and I realized that I was primarily living in survival mode desperate to maintain a sense of safety and normalcy. A large part of my mental and emotional space was concerned with planning the future and there was not much space for joy in the present moment. I interpreted the Golden Gate vision as confirmation that it was time to dissolve my life in Vancouver and begin a Ph.D program at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco.

I began my academic studies with a passion to integrate transpersonal experiences and transformational healing with plant teachers into my work as a counselor in reproductive health education and

maternity care. I had been immersed in the medical model for seven years and it seemed that there were many pitfalls in this system that did not serve the needs of women. My intention was to explore vegetalismo as a healing modality that could enable women with a history of sexual trauma to reclaim their sexuality as a sacred connection with themselves, nature, and the cosmos. I was blessed to be in the East-West Psychology program at California Institute of Integral Studies where Ph.D students were encouraged to also explore the North-South spiritual axis. I was able to take classes such as ancestral shamanism, holistic sexuality, spiritual counseling, and an independent study on shamanic sexuality where I investigated the perspectives of sex therapists and shamanic practitioners. I chose to use a heuristic methodology for the study because I realized that this type of method provided flexibility in navigating the research process to greater depths into the truth of the phenomenon. This personal integration felt like it was in alignment with the way I involved myself in creative endeavors.

In 2009, as I went deeper into my own emotional healing and required a research question, I decided to diet in isolation for three months in the Peruvian jungle. A master Shipibo-Conibo ayahuascero opened a diet for me with *pino blanco*, tobacco, and ayahuasca. On the first day of this diet I asked the plants for guidance for a research topic and in dreamtime I received a clear message to explore my sexual perceptions and practices. In the morning, to be certain that I understood the message, I was treated

to a showcase of two lizards copulating on my mosquito screen while monkeys swung through the trees in the background. In many shamanic cosmologies, including vegetalismo, lizards and monkeys symbolize pleasure, sexuality, and fertility. I respected this confirmation from the animal world and committed to following through with this theme of exploration. I realized that the research topic found me because I offered my body as a conduit for the voice of the plants. Romanyshyn (2007) validated my experience of the plants teachers talking to me during the research process when he explained, "the researcher, like the alchemist of old, might find himself or herself accompanied by a guide, with whom he or she may enter into dialogue for the purposes of the work" (p.271).

When I returned from the jungle to San Francisco I took a research methodology course where we were asked to visualize the methodology speaking to us. The vision that came to me was a seven-foot octopus and I reacted with bewilderment and fear. I learned on Wikipedia that octopi are very intelligent and can use camouflage within their environment to escape from predators. The octopi have three hearts and a life span as short as six months. The male octopi die after they give their sperm for reproduction and the female does not eat much for the month while she gives her full attention to caring for the eggs (and sometimes has to eat her arm for food). The octopus showed me the importance of completely focusing my attention to this study and was symbolic of how the process became all consuming, demanding 100% commitment. This commitment

required following my heart's desire to venture into unresolved areas of my soul's journey. The research study became an act of self-love and I resonated with Romanyshyn's (2007) perspective that "re-search with soul in mind is about erotic mutual seduction, a loving engagement with one's topic" (p. 271).

As much as I tried to shift to another research focus it seemed to already be studying me and all I could do was surrender and accept this destiny. With all my senses engaged at full capacity I felt a little crazed sometimes with the intensity. I did not anticipate the divergent phases that would unfold during the life of this dissertation. The immensity of the topic at times led to my indecisiveness and doubt in the whole academic process. It was in these moments that I attempted to flee by creating distractions involving all sorts of intricate relationship dramas. I realized that this resistance also highlighted a longing to heal my own physical and sexual abuse trauma and need for a reunification to wholeness.

The second phase of a heuristic project was immersion. In January 2010, as I was writing the research proposal, I decided to completely immerse myself in learning about *vegetalismo* and opened a year diet with coca. This was not a rational decision: rather I simply followed intuitive guidance that dieting was key to exploring a topic that extended far beyond what I had previously known. The attention required for maintaining a diet was symbiotic with the heuristic research process.

I decided to live on my own and create a home environment in the Northern Californian redwood forest that nurtured the seed planted inside me when I opened the diet. The diet required changing my daily routine. I was mindful of the food restrictions and mostly cooked for myself. My social interactions were limited to occasional quiet gatherings with a few friends and I tried to avoid highly populated events such as concerts and parties. Every morning and night I had a routine of meditating, singing, praying, drinking plants, and tending to my altar. I prayed daily for guidance before each step of the heuristic process. All the attention to lifestyle facilitated a tremendous amount of time for self-reflection and intuitive awareness that were key for this heuristic research.

I immersed myself in the vegetarianism and sex literature, listened to dozens of talks, and participated in a Buddhist meditation retreat for women focusing on sexual spirituality. As an artist who appreciated the visual expression of life I investigated how artists portrayed erotic merges between humans and other-than-human beings. I was taken back to the visualization exercise in the methodology course with the octopus vision when I found a Japanese artist's depiction of a woman having sex with an octopus (enjoying all the tactile pleasures that eight arms can bring).

Even though I was only at the beginning stage of the dissertation process I decided to present my research topic at the international Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelics Society (MAPS) in April 2010. It was a wonderful gathering of like-minded people who believed in

the power of entheogenic healing and spirituality. The presentations were video taped and posted on the MAPS website; surprisingly, I received email from viewers in the United States, Europe and Australia. They expressed appreciation for the research and offered to help in any way. I was not in a position to follow up with these kindred folk in any great depth; however, this outreach reaffirmed that there was a need to study and discuss this topic. I admit that at times when I desired to shift my focus away from academic research I was reinvigorated to continue on by re-reading the extraordinarily intimate stories that these plant drinkers shared.

When I reflected on the heuristic methodology, it became very clear that it was essential to bring the female voice into the field of vegetalismo. Additionally, it seemed appropriate to conduct a study on female plant drinkers because heuristic research includes the primary researcher's experience. During several trips to the Peruvian jungle for ayahuasca ceremonies from 2005–2010 I met several women and stayed in contact with them. Once I began writing the research proposal it seemed appropriate to reach out to these women, with whom I had already established a friendship. When I asked them if there were interested in participating in this study I was surprised by how readily everyone said yes. In fact, after I chose the sample group additional women offered to be interviewed without any hint that I was recruiting participants. This was another confirmation that women (and men) desired to have a safe

container to share their intimate stories of sexual/spiritual transformation with plant teachers.

In 2011 I collected the sacred stories of seven women participants in six different cities around North America. At certain moments I wondered why I chose a sample group that required an abundant allocation of resources (i.e., time, energy, and finances) over the course of nine months. However, as I transcribed the interviews and read the transcripts, I realized how precious these stories were and I felt grateful that I had persevered. The coresearchers represented courage and commitment to personal transformation and plant teachers. The plants spoke through the women during the interviews and I felt blessed by this wisdom. At challenging times when I was clumsily floundering in the dark during the diet and dissertation process the coreserachers' insights were beacons of light.

The third phase of heuristic research, incubation, occurred during the fall of 2011. I created space and disengaged from the research material to allow for guidance and an integration of the layers of information on a bodily level. My incubation entailed focused attention on business chores, reading books on diverse shamanic traditions, and participating in various earth-honoring rituals for as long as a week. This was a challenging time at first because it felt like there was a significant absence in my life. Incubation was necessary because after transcribing and reading the transcripts I became overwhelmed with all the material

and felt frustrated when the themes were not clearly surfacing. It was difficult to make heads or tails of how I would integrate all these interviews into a cohesive presentation that would honor their beautiful wisdom. Once I learned to have patience and trust in the unconscious process I was able to relax and let the meanings simmer in my belly. After periods of incubation I was able to approach the research material with a fresh perspective and found that the themes revealed themselves with grace and ease. My ability to tease out the essential features was fostered through this continual oscillation between rest and incubation.

During the fourth phase of illumination I realized my erroneous assumption that researching sexuality and spirituality would be a joyful and delightful process. I awoke from this naïveté when I remembered that there are both light and shadow aspects of sexuality and spirituality in the material and subtle realms. For instance, while I was dieting I dreamt about the coresearchers' accounts ranging from beautiful erotic merges with plant spirits to dehumanizing visions of sex slaves in dungeons. I kept a dream journal during the entire research process and three significant dreams emerged during this illumination phase that highlighted for me the light and shadow of sexuality in the subtle realm.

“Who’s Got the Funk”: A young black woman stood in front of me and I saw that her face was streaming with blood and her breasts were bruised. I knew she was sexually abused and that I must help her connect with the plants for healing. I saw a vision of this woman shoot her father who had sexually molested her. She was upset that she had to kill him but extremely happy that he was not around anymore. Then she sang the R&B song “Who’s Got the Funk.” (Author’s journal, March 3, 2011)

This dream reaffirmed the imperative need for sexual healing for woman all over the world. In waking time this was also emphasized in Peru when women plant drinkers would randomly share their sexual abuse stories with me, one involved being raped by her father.

“Sex With Winged Beings”: I was taking a nap with my partner and a couple floats over to us. My partner laughed and said, “Well, I guess we are having sex with this couple whether we like it or not.” The woman sat on my partner and explicitly revealed her vulva and penis and then he gave her fellatio. I noticed for a brief second that the couple had wings and that they were from another planet. I was nervous because this was so odd but I continued to watch in fascination. (Author’s journal, May 7, 2011)

This dream offered me the experience of uniting with exceptional beings in the subtle realm that some of the coresearchers shared about their erotic experiences.

The third dream I titled “Pubic Leaves.” I was working in a brothel and I went to the bathroom to trim my pubic area because it had roots with leaves that were one foot long (Author’s journal, July 22, 2011). This dream signified for me how my sexuality was completely interwoven with the energy of the plant teachers that I had been connecting with both experientially and academically.

Additionally, during this illumination phase, my own traumatic memories would surface that demanded attention. At times I felt overwhelmed and my desire to avoid suffering caused me to feel resistance in continuing this research. The simple truth was that the depth from which I was able to write about a process of discovery and healing required an equal level of developmental maturity. I realized my fear of

this research topic. If I truly honored the heuristic process then it was necessary to continually acknowledge feelings, ideas, dreams, and visions that surfaced around my own trauma of experiencing abuse as a child. This journey required immense self-reflection and self-discovery of personal experiences that were extremely challenging. Layers upon layers of insight have been illuminated. In summary I feel it is a miracle that I was able to journey through this dissertation process and it is a testament to the plant teachers, human teachers, family and friends who were all a tremendous support for me.

During the fifth explication phase the individual depictions for each coresearcher, individual portraits, and the composite depiction were created. I gave space within my psyche for the coresearcher's story to percolate and then I wrote the individual depiction. I re-read the transcripts repeatedly until I was able to create an accurate presentation of their experience. Then I identified the core themes and essences for each individual and the group as a whole. These themes were divided into four categories: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. I reflected on comparable categories that I could use such as physical, psychological, mythical, and spiritual; or upper, middle, and lower world; or inner, material, and subtle world. I finally chose terms that were commonly used in the public sphere that would not require extensive explanation.

A core theme was identified once it was revealed that at least three coresearchers had a similar experience. The following nine core themes

emerged: purification and support for reproductive health; increased sensory awareness; healing sexual abuse trauma; transformation of relationship with self; empowered decision making; enhanced intimacy with others; enhanced cognitive awareness; connecting with subtle energies; and connecting with God. Then I selected two participants who represented the experience of the whole group and the exemplary portraits were created. During this phase I became aware of how women's sexuality encompassed every aspect of their lives and that the plant teachers acted as spiritual guides along their journey to enhance erotic intelligence. These plant teachers became my spiritual guides during the entire research process and answered my prayers for support.

The last phase, creative synthesis, was an integration of all the researchers experiences, intuition, and insights gathered during the heuristic research process and is presented in an original creative way. This synthesis incorporates the researcher's intuitive response to the material that can be in the creative form of a story, poem, painting etc.... This required extensive self-exploration and after such an intense process during the last five phases it was necessary for me to be in solitude for an extended period of time to allow for the creative synthesis to emerge. I decided to take a month-long solo retreat at my parents' cabin to focus on the research topic. I went through a process of illuminating the phenomenon of erotic experiences with plant teachers through the creation of two paintings (Appendix E), and learning Shipibo icaros.

Chapter 4: Results

In heuristic research, individual depictions are included to highlight the central themes of each coresearcher's experience. These depictions give the essence of the phenomenon experienced and the meaning ascribed to these experiences by one individual coresearcher. Each depiction embodies the key elements using verbatim quotes of each coresearcher's experience of the phenomenon explored in the research study. I immersed myself in the coresearchers' experiences several times by listening to the interview-recordings and reviewing the interview transcripts. Through focusing on themes that emerged in the data I was able to create the individual depictions, and then I presented a draft of each individual depiction to the corresponding coresearcher for her review. Afterward, I altered the depictions based on the coresearchers' feedback into their final forms. The following depictions are in their final form.

Individual depiction—Asterope.

Eroticism to me is tantalizing in a sexual manner, or it could be a feeling, some kind of art, or many things. One of the things my teacher said to me was that plants are actually jealous when humans are sexual because they don't have that particular capacity. And when I think about my training as an herbalist, I think of the Damiana plant from Mexico for enhancing creativity particularly connected with female sexuality. It comes in a bottle shaped like a woman. What it came down to working with Damiana was that it is the creative energy coming through the earth.

The first diet created a lot of sensation in my energy body and some of it was sexual for me—a lot of physical energy. In a ceremony during my first diet the experience I had felt very sexual, but there was no engaging in sex because I was on the diet. I tried to channel that energy in a different way. I could feel every

molecule in my body that came up in a sexual way. I could feel all my senses.

I've had a lot of things going on with my menstrual cycle over the years, and in the last four to five years I've wondered if it was early menopause. There is sexual trauma in my history of my own creation. I looked for love, security, and comfort through sexuality, believing that this was the only way to get this. Particularly in my late teens, I acted out sexually a lot and recognized later that this was harmful to my psyche—and that this wasn't even sexual expression. This was lost confusion trying hard to get love and then turning sexually off, because I didn't know how to do it in a healthy way.

In ceremony I've done work in this area, wondering how to open this part of myself and questioning if it is appropriate to open this part in ceremony, because in most of the ceremonies I have attended there has been a man facilitating it. What does it mean to open up my sexuality where the container is being held by a man? When I've wanted to look at this I wondered where the trust is, in how those boundaries may or may not be perceived. I found myself in positions where I felt I may cross a boundary—my own boundary. This is when I need to be present and aware, but sometimes I'm not clear where the line is. If the man facilitating the ceremony is also not clear, then how to navigate this foggy area has been difficult.

I get real clear about boundaries and [how to] not have these boundaries pushed in any way and remain in an acute sense of mindfulness. Definitely it's a challenging thing, because in my history I didn't have any boundaries. On that level it's actually good, because I went from having no boundaries to having rigid boundaries. So when I'm in a ceremony with a person I respect a great deal; where I don't want to project my fear and judgments, it's an opportunity to put my boundary here and here. Where the situation plays out in a way that I need to express my boundary in an open way, where I can take back my sexuality from being rigid. In the past when someone came close to my boundary I said "Back off" like a literal shove, but this is in a different way. There's a tenderness where I need to be really clear so I can hold my boundary without pushing. It's been an opportunity for learning on a very deep level. How does this express itself in my life is hard to say, because I can see myself flopping on both sides as I learn to navigate learning about my sexuality after 20 years of having it shut down.

There is a combination of things that helps me to have firm boundaries in ceremony. One is working with the medicine for a number of years and being able to hold a particular grounded-ness and centeredness. The other piece is having my boundaries so

rigidly placed. I want to have the boundary in place without pushing. It's asserting the boundary without pushing that is challenging. Because I spent 20 years asserting a boundary by being crass—whatever it took to turn sexual attention away, trying to protect myself from myself. It's about how I expressed myself sexually and not really about anyone else. I spend time in ceremony trying to heal these wounds. I could see how someone who isn't clear about their boundaries could be in a complicated situation, and I've seen this happen.

It's a difficult balance, particularly when coming up against someone else's boundaries. In a wounded person this softness can be seen as place to push...it's a vulnerability. I would say by no means do I feel fully embodied in my sexuality. I don't feel in all honesty that that's where I am. I still find myself in situations where I ask "How did that happen?" but I'm learning that it's all part of the process.

First there was a rigidity of seeing my boundaries as not important as the closeness that I wanted. There's a real harshness about this and how it was played out in my history, particularly as a young person, making those boundaries really rigid and doing it in a hard way. Saying to myself, "You've made some really fucked up choices and you're not going to do that again" in a really aggressive way. There was an aggression towards myself and my sexuality that scared the shit out of me.

The ovarian cyst I had years ago is gone but there's still pain. Periodically it will come out of nowhere. I know it's my right ovary, even though I know the cyst isn't there—but the pain is there. Then the pain goes away and I say "Oh, that's just life." Maybe there's an emotional mindset of my personal frustration, thinking that it all comes down to relationships, and I spend all my time putting up boundaries against this. How do I even open to this and try to figure out how to relax? Then I get caught in the stories of not knowing if I can do it, and that's when the pain comes up. When I let go of that the pain tends to ease off.

I was at the closing of my diet and being with a new thing that was unfolding with someone. Allowing for the sexual energy to be present and not engaging in it. My wounds were only half the story and—I wondered if I could manage someone else's wounds. And the answer was no, because there was too much with my stuff. The plants have taught me to be careful and guarded with erotic and sexual connections I make with people in day-to-day life. On this path we have to be, because we're so open and we develop sensitivities.

I've had encounters in ceremonies where spirits have come through and [I was] feeling an erotic charge with these spirits. Sometimes it's positive and sometimes it's negative, and based on

the dynamics of these interactions I'll guard myself from it if it's expressed in a negative sense or be open to it if it's in a positive sense. There's also no question that sometimes the connection you have with some energy gets opened up, which can be a beautiful experience. It's a combination of intuition and vibration and the different hits that help me to discern if it's positive or negative.

One of the deepest wounds I have is in the area of sexuality. This is the place where I can go deeply to explore my wounds and the plants help take me to that place. They sit with me and witness me in that state. They hold that space for me to explore and there's no judgment. The way plants communicate is so subtle and demands subtlety. You can't be hard and try to communicate with something that is whispering so gently—otherwise you can't hear them. You have to learn a different way to hear. If I want to hear the plants I need to be soft and be relaxed. The plants have taught me a quality of listening and a quality of softening that has relaxed the rigidity in me. The plants are so quiet, subtle, and delicate. When I think of the connection with the plants, I think of it primarily as a spiritual space and that's what spiritual connection is all about. So there's the aspect of connecting with plant spirits, which is a spiritual practice.

Individual depiction—Taygeta.

Eroticism makes me think of the paintings in India of Shiva and Shakti—a loving embrace between a male and female, male and male, female and female. The coming together of two. The closest I've come to having an erotic experience was during the first few years of drinking ayahuasca. It was a small and intimate ceremony with good friends, ranging from the ages of 23 to 60. I remember feeling pure bliss and the setting was amazing. I wanted to make out with everyone in the room, not in a sexual way but in a loving way, to express my love. I felt I could do it and my heart said yes—but my mind said that this was not acceptable. I thought about the next morning and how weird it would be and how in our society it wouldn't go over well. I haven't experienced this again.

In terms of the plant diet I was very sexual with animals during dreams. Two profound experiences with a bear and a wolf occurred during my first year [long] diet. The bear was half bear and half human and was very gentle and healing. I realized that we are all one. Separation was an illusion and that in reality we're all connected. We're all unified and we have a deep connection with our totem animals and everyone. I felt a deeper sense of peace and oneness with the whole world. I tend to be a worrier and in my mind a lot and it seemed that the diet cleaned out my mind so there was more space. I find it hard to articulate the changes with dieting

because they are so subtle. And sometimes it can take years to see what the changes are. I felt clean on a physical level and much more grounded. I would let things roll off my back and not lose an ounce of sleep.

Spiritually, I realized we are all connected and [I] wanted to be a more conscious citizen, to be more mindful about the environment and how my actions affect everything. I wanted to be more disciplined and to have gratitude and how to take time out of everyday to have gratitude. The diets definitely changed my life. It needed to be a year long. Ayahuasca gives insights and the diets teach on a subtle level.

I am a sexually repressed person and only now am I becoming more comfortable with my body. I hit puberty when I was 9 and was always ashamed of my body. When I was being sexual with the animals in dream-time it felt very safe and liberating. It opened up an area of my heart that was closed before. I want to do another diet focusing on the heart.

I would drink a full cup and be blasted out. I went into the bathroom and had a feeling about my reproductive organs that I didn't want to look at. It's never come up again, and I don't know if I shut the door. I don't know what it meant but I would like to open this door sometime. I feel like in past lives I've lost babies and that maybe there's trauma. There may be a blockage and feel I need to explore more. I wouldn't feel comfortable doing this in a big ceremony, and I would only want to do it with a particular male shaman. That's another thing—that there aren't very many female practitioners, which is a shame.

During my second Chai diet, at the nine-month mark, I had a very strong dream that told me I needed to close my diet. I was sad because I wanted to complete the year diet and I felt so good, but the message was so strong that I could not ignore it. So I closed and I had some blood work done. I was curious, being a nurse, what our body goes through [during a diet]. My body was very tired and a bit depleted. My iron was so low my doctor couldn't believe I was walking and hiking. So I had four months during the summer to replenish my body. I took iron and within two weeks I felt stronger. I incorporated all the non-diet foods...I had a feeling my body was preparing for a baby and in October I conceived. Without that strong message during the diet I would have been on the diet until September, and I believe I wouldn't have been strong enough to conceive. It all was perfectly aligned. During the birth Chai was very much present. In a ceremony and on the diet you go to your edge and experience dark nights of the soul. Knowing that I could experience this helped me go through the labor because I was taken to my edge. It was meditation and breathing, being still and

listening, that got me through. During the final push I called on the work with the plant medicines.

I started out dieting Boahausca for an ovarian cyst and then it turned into a spirit healing. It really opened up the dream world. The cyst went away, which was confirmed by an ultrasound. My first diet with Boahuasca laid the foundation and changed me on all levels. Chai was a protector, and taught me how to be spiky on the outside and strong within myself. That was my challenge in life in terms of being pushed around and indecisive. So I feel Chai was preparing me to be a mom and be solid within myself, to be more assertive in my life, and have a purpose in my life. I'm so grateful for all of this. The plants taught me discernment.

Plant medicines are special because many are very feminine and motherly so it feels good for women. Herbs have been used for a long time and many plants are used for reproductive organs. The plants are very subtle and I find it easier to integrate, especially if there's deep trauma. It's not shocking but instead gentle. The greatest strength is gentleness.

Plants have helped me to find a sense of wholeness in my relations as a woman with women and with men. It's given me an incredible amount of strength to move forward in relationships when the waters are murky and complicated. I found my own wholeness of being, of being intimate, owning it—and not necessarily seeking it out with men because I already have it innately. My relationship with my own mother has strengthened. Working with [ayahuasca] has given me a much deeper appreciation [of my mother], the choices that she's made, and the person that she is now. This has helped me to heal those wounds, release them and move on. It's been a beautiful process with my mother.

Individual depiction—Alcyone.

Eroticism is really interesting. When I was in Peru I had experiences with a lot of sexual energy coming through and often happening in a series in a row. I've been sitting with sexual energy and life force energy and how it's the same. How I can hold the energy as a life force and take it to a sexual level. I was exploring the whole room which felt like it was pulsating and not getting distracting but keeping it as a life force, pure radiance where my body would get hot. It was a lot of heat. Earlier on I would transfer that energy to whomever I was sitting beside which was dangerous. It got me into a dangerous place because I was taking his energy and he was receiving my energy.

I see really clearly how I gave energy to men. I had an experience during the marosa diet [when] there were all these men in my life. I felt really charged up by all of that and how destructive

that was. I need to hold my energy carefully and only give energy to my partner. I'm much more clear in my boundaries. I notice when I'm giving me and check whether it's my ego and why I'm doing this. I've noticed more guys wanting energy and how much men are pulling energy from me. I've kept it in a place of not going any further.

It's funny because I've been trying to push sexuality away on this diet. I don't know how much eroticism is connected to death and birth. Erotic energy is a life force and this is birth and death. Most recently when I was in Peru my teacher was cleaning me every night and worked on me for a couple of hours. He cleaned each of my organs, uterus and ovaries. My initial reaction was to push away and I got defensive. When he was working on me I felt sharp pain. I told him later that I wanted to have a child and he told me that if he hadn't done the work there would have been a disturbance.

What I'm learning with the plants is not so much physical but more vibrationally. There are layers and layers of coming off. One way my teacher is helping me is to get clean. It has taken a lot to help me and after these cleanings I was initiated as a curandera. After he cleaned me he would have me work on him. He was having a lot of pain and he told me when the effects came on strong to work on him so I was working on him every night and doing energy work. It's an energy work with plants that I've learned from plants. It's light coming through where there are blockages and clearing them. I feel like [I am] at the very beginning learning about this. So mostly the way I see I'm with light and vibration. The spirits that come through take me to places and show me about light and vibration. I've seen amazing spirits but they don't talk with me. When it's quiet I hear Ajo Sacha as a vibration all the time. When I'm in Peru and I'm really clear and it's quiet I hear her all the time. When I was down there it was almost too much. After ceremonies when it was quiet she comes through and works with me in the form of vibration.

On this path the teachings come in so many different ways. For me personally during the last many years there has been an edge of sexual energy. It's really hard when it's a shaman working with me and there's energy of pure love. It has been really hard not letting it become a sexually charged experience. Part of my work on this path is carrying the feminine. I got caught in sexuality and I broke a diet once years ago. It screwed me up and I was in a bad place. I told my teacher and he looked at me and was furious saying I broke my diet. I said I didn't have sex but he was furious saying "I've given you all of this and you took it all away, all the work you've done is gone." It took four nights to clean me up. There was also another thing going on with a shaman who was taking my

energy. I was misinterpreting spirits that came through to seduce me and [I] let it happen. At the beginning it felt good but then realized that dark forces were getting in. I learned when spirits were trying to seduce me and that it was a huge red flag that something was trying to get in. That's the doorway. I felt different when a dark energy tried to get in during dreamtime or visions that came in the form of a man seducing me. I had experiences where a man would touch me and I froze and couldn't get him off of me. I lost all my power. It was a series of getting major attacks. It hasn't been happening recently because I've been careful but earlier it happened regularly while I was going to ceremony. My teacher doesn't give me a whole lot of guidance especially in a situation like this. It was something I had to learn on my own but I've learnt it. This path that I've been on for many years has been hard. I've been attacked so many times and it's horrible. I was blank and physically exhausted in ceremony. When I've been attacked my teacher says they're magical sorcery beings that really want my energy. Also in my dreams after an attack there is fighting, bullets, blood and that's how I know I've been under attack—just feeling not good.

My background is in botany. Even when I was young I felt a connection to medicinal plants learning about the science of plants. I got so charged up by it. It was my dream since I was young to be working with a shaman. I had all these books about shamans and plants and it evolved into this work. Passaflora was my first plant teacher. I was in Costa Rica when I was in university and I studied for six months. I collected plants and studied how they protect themselves. I loved it and this was my first plant teacher. The plants are so beautiful and so sensual, the most beautiful spirits beings I can ever imagine. They are so generous and can also take energy away if we don't honor them, pure beauty.

Something really important for people to know is how powerful they are, a power that can be used in many ways or can be given away. There is definitely a power play that goes on with sexuality, of really knowing what is true and trusting our discernment. I've seen women who get caught in an ego place and receive from the masculine as a way of getting filled. But this is from an ego space. It is coming from a place of grasping or needing to fill ourselves.

Individual Depiction—Merope.

Eroticism is something whether it is visual, spoken, or an idea that evokes sexuality. The first thing that comes to mind in terms of eroticism is being completely overtaken by an energy that did not feel like it was mine. It came from the outside that wanted me to express. It was crazy. I had not been sexual because I thought my

2nd chakra was shut down and this came out of nowhere. I was pretty sure that something was messing with me and I had a vision of it when I was in Peru. It didn't feel like it came from my life and it didn't feel like me. It felt great but it didn't feel like me. I was dieting ayahuasca and it was like no other experience I've ever had. I enjoyed it for a bit and I was all over myself. Then I stopped because it felt male and it didn't feel like me. It had been so long being on the diet and I realized that something wanted to be expressed. When I felt that it was not my energy I stopped it. Part of my experience is that I'm working through familial things, old conditioning, lineage and I didn't have a link for this.

My intention for the diet was to clear and relieve the nagging in the back of my head that said "you need to diet, you need to diet." In terms of sexual reproductive issues my intention was to leave behind in Peru what I didn't need with me at home. When I was in a ceremony in Peru part of my story was experiencing excruciating pain. A past life story that I'd been shown was that my child died and I died while giving birth. I kept saying the first night "I am not having a hysterectomy," and I heard the healer say "you're healthy and not going to have a hysterectomy," and I knew I was going to be okay. I believed my karmic story about dying in childbirth and my child dying as well. I was shown the story that probably my decision not to have children was the fear of dying in childbirth, subconsciously.

A month after returning from Peru I did not have my moon. I had blood while in Peru that was a color red that I had never seen before and I think I've had my moon three times since then. I've always been regular and now I gain weight without trying and realize that the fuzziness I experienced was pre-menopausal. Then I was able to relax and ride the wave. At first I was concerned because I love my moon. A couple other women shared with me that when they stopped their moon they could move the energy into their heart and be more creative. Hearing this was a great comfort. I'm learning not to be attached and understand that it's part of the process. I don't know why my moon stopped. It just seems to be something that is working for me right now. Something in my subconscious was telling me that it would have been more difficult if I had children. I don't know if it's the plants or the discipline that has taught me because it's been so long since I've had intercourse. One of the reasons I didn't have intercourse was because I was afraid of becoming pregnant. So abstinence was the best policy for me. I understood the responsibility and I tried to not talk myself into a story and was open to what appeared before me.

A year diet with ayahuasca was much more important than sexual communion with another person. I had the experience of clearing old abuse issues that I believe were necessary to be a

healthier sexual being. I had this dream that I was transported back to being five or six [years old] and someone made a move that was affecting me at that time. When I said “no” a cylinder canister about eight inches around and three feet tall poured out letters of the alphabet soup. I knew that this was being cleared. I saw it being cleared. That was about three months into my diet and after that if someone came into my field that previously I had a charge around I would have no hit, no charge, nothing. I don’t know if it was ayahuasca or the process of committing to clearing in the diet.

I would go for periods of two or three nights in a row around my moon time when my sexual drive became most heightened. Unknown men would show up in my dreams and I think only once I engaged in sex and it was great. There may have been two men at the same time and it was great. But usually because I was on the diet I would say no or when the situation would get close I would say “No, it doesn’t feel right.” And if a female energy showed up it usually showed up as me—not another woman so I realized it was me wanting me. Again I could go for months of not wanting to have sex or have any sexual charge at all. I’ve seen someone else’s attachment of a sexual nature. I was dreaming and saw what appeared to be snake—kind of grey. It was a snake that moved through a corner of my awareness. I was told in my dream that it belonged to someone else and then when I was in Peru I purged it. It was still in my field and I purged it. We can control to a certain point and there are energies that take over a persons’ personality. Until they have the ability to work through these things there are going to be issues.

I had something happen where a relative who had passed that was very ill and had sexually abused who knows how many children. I was visiting someone very ill and older than me, a woman in a hospital and I heard someone say, “Touch her.” I turned around and it was my grandfather. I later had an opportunity in an ayahuasca ceremony to hear beings say, “Don’t worry, we’re taking him out of your field. Just sit down and we’ll take care of it,” and I felt the energy being lifted from me and it was gone. I don’t like these situations and I don’t like children being involved. I have difficulty judging people if they haven’t had an opportunity to do this kind of medicine work. It deepens my compassion of seeing this snake like thing and then having it show up in Peru and being told this was bad. I didn’t need to be told. I knew it was bad. I also believe that we come here for a reason. It’s a 50–50 participation, folks. We signed up for a lesson and we can choose to be the victim or not. It’s a choice as adults, conscious adults, to ascribe to whatever story we want to.

The very beginning of the diet I met someone and we got intimate. I knew when to say [stop] and it was challenging. This

person said it would be okay but [he] didn't understand. It was very clear that there was no negotiation and that the diet came first. This was the time in my life for me and that was clear. The diet made me much more fierce in protecting myself.

I thought I was going to have a lot of sex after the year diet but I haven't. I had an opportunity to have casual sex and it had been so long but I said no. I was glad I had that [option] put in front of me so I knew it wasn't for me. I'm way more interested in quality so that's one of the reasons I haven't been seeking it or why it hasn't shown up. As much as I enjoy sex it doesn't matter if it happens again. I don't know that it does. I can't predict every situation. I want to know which decision will leave me the most empowered and leave me with the least regret. It's not about being in the moment—as fun as it is—it's about the implications down the road, not wanting to cause harm to another person and to be as clear as possible about where I'm at. I realize that for me I'm working to choose situations that are clear where there's no pull. I do a lot of considering and a lot of observing. I think about it a lot and [I'm] not wanting to do the drama thing. I'm waiting for a partner who understands what I'm trying to convey in regards to sharing energy.

Sex is really good, really really good, and a beautiful thing. It's even more beautiful in my life because I'm much more clear in what I want. What other people do it's fine for them. I don't care unless people are being harmed. I'm a sexual being whether I'm having sex with someone or not. I don't need to feel like I'm excluding it but that it's my nature. I look forward to meeting someone whose energy is similar to mine.

The diet is individual and personal. Everyone has their own issues to work on. I believe the diet has certain requirements that need to be followed. It's key to be isolated and follow the food restrictions and not to be hard on themselves. No matter how long the diet is there are benefits.

Individual Depiction—Maia.

For me personally eroticism involves more senses than just sexual where more energy and connection is involved. Sexuality with more senses which could involve any number of emotions such fear, pain, love, spiritual connection. There are different forms of eroticism that brings other elements into the sexual interaction. I knew that the sickness that ruled my life was a sexually oriented sickness. I had endometriosis and pelvic and uterine pain all the time. I was supposed to get my uterus removed and had menstrual cycles where I was bleeding constantly for six months at a time. I had physical sickness that I knew was a result of sexual abuse as a

child. Before I started dieting plants I had more partners than I want to mention. There was a ridiculous amount of lack of discretion in sexual partners; men, women, married, unmarried, someone I knew, someone I didn't know. It didn't matter because it was impulsive and the language of seeking. It's the same as seeking drugs and trying anything, LSD, mushrooms, ecstasy. I was seeking but in the wrong direction. I think my sexuality in the past was evidence of how deep my sickness was but also evidence of my desire to be healthy. There was an identity I had created around being sick with my sexuality that I wasn't ready to let go of yet. There was some victimization that I was hanging onto that took a lot to let go of.

This particular plant is to clear up baggage and in a ceremony I was shown what I was going to be cleaning up. Some of the visions were extremely disturbing and erotic as well. The images were of vampires, sex slaves, abuse of power and men and women chained to stone walls in dungeons where they were sex slaves born in this role and they found ways to enjoy the role and play with this power. There were the times I was molested, abused and raped when I was younger. The generational sickness around sexuality that I carry and that my family carries is a cellular memory. So the diet cleared this up and [helped me] to know what's clean sexuality and what's a misuse of power sexuality. That was the purpose of the diet. There was an identity I had created around being sick with my sexuality that I wasn't ready to let go of yet. There was some victimization that I was hanging onto. Once I processed the shame of being the perpetrator and saw what I was capable of doing. I had compassion for both sides. After recovering from what I saw in terms of how sick we can be as humans and I was willing to accept the whole picture the healing happened pretty quickly.

The healing process was painful. There was a lot of purging and a lot of physical pain like being energetically scrubbed out. I knew that all those energetic spaces needed to be healed and I needed to take responsibility for what I'm going to put back into those empty spaces. Learning to not repeat the pattern of filling those spaces with more sickness and to guard those spaces and what to put there or how to leave them open. That part was painful but as more was released I felt lighter. I felt more vulnerable and more weak but also stronger. I felt physically weak and spiritually rock solid but there's a balance. It's the same as holding both realities of being the victim and the perpetrator. I'm physically weak and anyone could take me out in five seconds but they can't touch the part that has been healed and part of my soul. There was a huge relief. Healing was a huge relief and then there was some fear because the question is now what do I do. The healing itself was a

slow process a section at a time. It didn't happen overnight and part of that is as humans we wouldn't be able to handle healing all at once. We need to walk in the world with each part as they heal—how to reprogram ourselves into being someone new.

Before the diet I saw everything through multiple layers of sickness. I couldn't tell what was reality, what was insecurity, what was my sickness or what was someone else's. You're looking at something through 15 different lenses and you don't know what's reality even though your intention is to be clear, but you don't know what's clouding what. And post-diet it's so much clearer. You know what's yours and what's someone else and you know how to clean it off. You're not looking at past, present, future. You're only looking at the present. There's a huge difference. When you're reacting it's only in the present moment. When your reaction is disproportionate you're dealing with all kinds of cloudy issues. There's a huge difference in how you walk in the world. You're not walking as a damaged 1-year-old, 2-year-old, 6-year-old, and teenager.

I don't think I'll ever be able to be in a sexual relationship with anyone in a carefree way. I'm so much more aware of what it actually means to exchange energy. I won't want to expose myself to someone's energy if they're not clean or there are only a few times when I'm clean enough to expose my energy to someone else. I've abused sexual energy so much and for so long that I'm totally not interested until I know I'm going to be totally clean with it.

When I dieted ajo sacha he introduced himself to me and told me that we were going to be lovers and that our worlds were going to be interconnected from everything mundane as doing the dishes to things as complicated as spirit traveling and my healing work. In that conversation with the ajo plant spirit there was trust developing and saying that we would be interwoven and walking together. I asked the spirit "What's in it for you? Why would you clean me out?" The answer was, "The human body is the most incredible playground ever and if you can maintain an environment (i.e., no salt, no sugar) so that I can stay in your body, it's the funniest playground of all—to see things from a human perspective—in a human body—to be able to move in a way that I've never been able to move before." In that I understood what he meant by being a lover and the idea of a plant entering the human kingdom and a human entering the plant kingdom. It's just as foreign to both of us and a mutually beneficial thing which is kind of erotic in it's own way.

I don't understand how plants work so intensely and so quickly but I know they work on a cellular level. They reprogram the nervous system and take away the channels that were made as we grew up in trauma and rebuild them into something healthier. Plants push the reset button and we can start over without losing the

wisdom that you've collected through your life and through your mistakes. You can clear the nervous system and take away the cellular memory of trauma and put healthy fluid back in without losing the wisdom. I truly think that is what's happening. It's curious that some plants have sexual personalities and like to enter people's bodies because it's a sexual playground. The plants can be male or female and some are sexually feminine or sexually masculine. Plants have sexual energy and I learned that sexual energy is more than the physical act of mating. Lust or strong sexual energies hold the potential for tantra because it's so potent. They're the doorway into a higher coupling and an energetic mating because there are so many different dimensions in the plant world. If the plant world is also interested in sexuality it makes you wonder how many dimensions sexuality actually covers. It's not just reproduction but there's a deep drive to share energy with other entities and we've just confused it with the act of mating. I don't understand it but it's curious.

It's been a hard lesson, first how to trust, how to trust appropriately, and who to trust. I've learned the hard way to trust my own intuition over other people that I have high respect for. Shamans, even extremely potent and powerful healers, are human and have their own illnesses and sometimes do things out of their own state of illness. Earlier on I put the shaman in the position of a guru where I completely surrendered and I was mistaken in doing that. When I heard about his indiscretions I was reactive and pulled away from the tradition altogether, and quit my diet early because I didn't want to be connected with a tradition that was not respectful to women. He may be healthy at some point, but I won't be part of the sickness and that's where the intuition comes in, because if it doesn't feel right then I won't be a part of it. With the healing comes power, and if you're not accountable to God then all you are is powerful. Ultimately it's still our choice how we walk in the world. Just because someone has cleaned out their past trauma with the diet it doesn't mean a new level of sickness can't take over that is power-induced.

Ayahusaca and other plant teachers are the fast track to healing. With power comes responsibility and that's where accountability comes in. The more power you get the more humble you need to be. The scariest part is that there is no one this shaman is accountable to because he has reached a point where he's so strong in his power. I don't know where his accountability is and that is when it gets scary. I need to find a system where a group of shamans keep each other in balance. It's sad and a shame that women have to be so careful about where we go to get our healing. We can be wounded in the same area that we need healing. It's such a shame. That's the biggest struggle I'm working

with right now. To not turn my back on the medicine way and know that the medicine has its own life and there are times of sickness and times of healing. I'm waiting for another person to open that diet and manage the diet. It's a shame that I feel I have to find a female ayahuascero in order to stay safe but that's the position I'm in. I need to find a female practitioner to know that I don't always have to be on guard and know that I'm going to be safe in a ceremony or diet. Or to potentially find a couple where a male and female keep each other in balance. Whatever sickness is in front of you is the doorway to what is needed. Women have been abused and misused for centuries and now we're in a time when women are finding their power. It may not be pretty as women learn how to say "no" and not be connected to victimhood, which is the same with all oppressed groups in society. As people find their power they find their intuition and don't allow the victimization to begin. As women become stronger it's only natural that the oppressor type role of some of the men would become stronger to keep women in the oppressed position. So they're going to up the ante as women become more powerful until it all balances out. It's all part of the process. Women are healing as a whole and it's threatening to men. Women have to go more slowly and methodically because they have their tribe, children, and parents and whoever they're care giving for. It's slower but it's stronger because it's in community. There's safety in groups

The diet has helped me fine-tune it so when my intuition is talking to me and I'm not listening I will stop everything and figure out what I'm supposed to be listening to. When I have that kind of clarity and discipline it's easily dealt with. When I ignore the gut feeling and I'm busy being angry or distracted it can progress to sickness and more anger. The body ups the ante so the gut ache turns into double-over pain that can turn into diarrhea and other things. The body will keep trying to get your attention and if you continue to not listen I think it turns into cancer and really deep diseases. The diets have helped me get clear communication between me and my soul. I think that intuition is the dialogue between my earthly self and my soul...that there's a dialogue that happens between my higher self and my humanness. My soul is connected to the Great Spirit or God so that's the umbilical cord between my humanness and God. There is an actual dialogue that sometimes is in symbols, language and dreams. The diet taught me discipline, out of sheer survival—how to call for help. Through making the decision daily to stay on the diet it reinforced my decision to heal and be well. It helped me through all the parts that lead me to believe that I deserved to be well. I became stronger because that's the connection to being well, to be connected to being well however you define well. What the diet is doing is

clearing out space and putting in God, however you define it. So spiritually I had a much richer life because there was more space for God. Ultimately my goal in life is to be more connected with Spirit. All of these feelings of sickness are feelings of home-sickness for God.

Individual Depiction—Celaeno.

Eroticism to me is something that inspires a physical experience that taps into my life force. It used to involve my genitalia and what has changed is that it's less so. It's an arousing reverie that can show up in the body but is not limited to the body. Since I've been involved in this discipline I've had an erotic encounter in dream-time. I had one dream where I was in a very public European square where I saw two friends. Nothing was consummated but it was like being hugged from all sides. I've been very asexual for a couple of years now, in fact celibate. My husband was diagnosed with diabetes a couple of years ago and his sexuality has been really dinged but it's really been a non-issue for us. In my younger years I was promiscuous really trying to experiment with sex. So the last couple years it's been no sex. What's happened is that my sexual fantasies have not been about people but energy, like communing with an entity that I can't see or like being on the ground and making love to something I can't see. This has happened in the last six months and I can only attribute this to the plants I've dieted. I'll try to evoke the image of a human body but it doesn't work. So it's really me summoning energy. I feel like where I am in the couple of years I've been drinking is much more aware of the energy in the room but I'm not able to see visuals. Sometimes it's a three-dimension grid or phosphorous type cloud imagery but it's mostly being aware of entities crowded around me.

The diets I've had are three months with coca and four months with ajo sachá and ten days in the jungle. The sexual energy has definitely changed. I'm of the menopausal age and I don't know what that means. I've had symptoms of hot flashes but nothing has been off the charts. Overall just a lot more energy. This has been interesting informing me another way and feeling energy in my spine, a lot more joy and expressiveness. I don't have as much filtering of the truth. It feels like the energy I had in the genital area is now surging upwards in my body and fusing me with different energy.

In this culture there is such a focus on how much sex we're having, with who, when and why. I don't miss it at all. I don't think it's gone it's just transmuted.

I've been married a long time, 30 years. My husband had been sick a long time and was just pushing through so we had not

been connecting well. We went through waves of having sex a lot and then not having sex for six months. It was about managing his symptoms. He's transformed himself. Illness was a metaphor of a grief in showing him how he was walking through this world. We were in a depression and holding down emotions. So this was a break. I had a mid-life career change and went back to grad school. There were domestic stresses and life changes and when I hit 50 I decided to drink ayahuasca. So I started drinking and went to Peru. I haven't had sexual trauma, however, I have a strong intuitive sense that something happened but I don't know what it was. I got a lot of disjointed imagery. There's sexuality and it doesn't look fun. Then there was my sister and that something happened to her. Something about the Vatican and that somehow I was involved in a sexual way with my brother who is two years older than me. This was frightening but I don't have any evidence. On two occasions now the shaman said that he saw me in a prison and rats running around. My pants were coming off me and it was enormously phallic and sexual, pornographic stuff that couldn't be mine. He said that it had to be the work I'm doing and I'm picking up stuff.

When I closed with ajo sachá I remember the moon beaming on me and I got the message that although I went through a tough time I got through it. It was strengthening for me and I felt gratitude that I got so much more from my father than hurt. I'm grateful for what I've been able to endure and in Peru I got the message that it was all about training. It was a cost benefit analysis. I needed strengthening for what was yet to come. My intentions are to help me navigate through the fear. Fear is like a convulsing dog. I'm gravitating towards a gentler way—a feminine way. I've been living in a masculine way for so long and the plants are guiding me to a safe, caring, and gentler way. What plants have done for me is tap me into the Divine feminine, of motherhood, womanhood, and daughterhood, and to be able to tap into this and help other people tap into it. Getting into those deep internal resonances that women have with what it means to be a woman, whether their connection is guarded, defensive, beautiful, or harmonious has made me a lot stronger being a woman.

My experience has made it clear that I feel sexual energy all the time and that sexual energy is not limited to the body. It takes the emphasis off the mechanics of sexuality and onto the connection with the universe. It has redirected me outward.

Part of the reason I believe there was sexual trauma in my past is that before my fantasies were very aggressive and now they're not. What's happened is that my sexual fantasies have not been about people but energy like communing with an entity that I can't see or like being on the ground and making love to something I can't see. This has happened in the last six months and I can only

attribute this to the plants I've dieted. I'll try to evoke the image of a human body but it doesn't work. So it's really me summoning energy. Before my fantasies were very aggressive and now they're not. Now it is truly a union with something else and because my fantasies have transformed I feel there's evidence that I'm healing. I'm grateful for what I'm able to feel in my body. There's so much more play and song. I come from a Celtic lineage and someone said we are all like leprechans and we all sing. I am intrinsically musical and I get the message that I'm supposed to be communicating in a musical way. Now I have no hesitation to make sound and be spontaneous and feel joy.

Individual Depiction—Electra.

Eroticism means that which ignites, inspires, and provokes an awakening of sexual energy that feels comfortable to receive. The first thing that comes to mind for me as a result of participating in ceremonies is how an erotic experience is better than sex. What I believe happens is we diet and abstain from sexual thoughts. On my first one-year diet I could not imagine not having or thinking about sex but I didn't think about it at all. I was really shocked by that but what I believe is happening is when we drink there is a building up of sexual energy. So there's an expression of sexuality during ceremony that is erotic and satisfying that doesn't include sexual acts.

I had an ovarian cyst when I was young and then another one when I received information during a ceremony that there was something growing on my ovary that was confirmed by an ultrasound. Surgery was recommended but I thought that even though I could have surgery to take out a body part there would still be something growing. A hysterectomy was suggested by the doctor and instead I decided that I needed to work with plants. Boahuasca was calling me. On the physical level boahuasca cured me. You know how when you meet someone they send off pheromones and you become activated. Boahuasca was right there on all levels. Having this super keen awareness of being able to smell my lover's body and saying that is right on for me...like an exact fit. I'm such an olfactory person right down to the level of smell and touch. The best way to describe my relationship with the plant is like I married ayahuasca...you know how nuns talk about marrying Jesus. I lived in a state of altered consciousness for weeks with Boahuasca...and all this sexual healing is going on but the irony is that I wasn't able to have sex with my husband.

I signed up for a class on sustainable growing with local medicinal plants and felt an attraction for the teacher. He came to do a consult on my property and there was energy between us. He

had had the experience of a non-ordinary state of consciousness with plants and understood there was a connection that he would explore later. When he met me he thought it was all coming together. One thing led to another and we didn't do anything sexual but the sexual energy between us was high. I was dieting boahuasca and not supposed to have sexual thoughts and the plant was healing my sexual reproductive organs. But I still fell in love with this guy. We laugh because it was a plant conspiracy. One thing leads to another and we didn't do anything sexual but the sexual energy between us was high. Mind you I was dieting boahuasca and not supposed to have sexual thoughts and the plant was healing my sexual reproductive organs. I was 49 years old at the time and all this healing is going on. I fell in love with this guy...anyone who knows me knows that I'm loyal...like the tortoise that just plugs along. So I'm dieting and we're skating the edge of whether or not I'm keeping my diet. We're together and sleeping together and not having sex but it's really steamy and hot...this is not me. I would bring Boahuasca to bed and he would start to chant and he had never even drunk ayahuasca yet—it was off the hook. One of the reasons why I told my husband was because we wanted to have sex. Perhaps I was out of integrity during my marriage because I didn't want to have sex with him and instead with someone else.

During a purge I felt a divine love for my husband. I felt that I've let him go and the expectations I had of him as my husband were gone so I can really love...not the kind of love that I want to be with him. I was able to hold him in that space of love which I hadn't been able to do for years. The emotional part was an result of the prompting asking myself do I really love my husband, no I don't, and do I really want to go on like this, no I don't. So it really took the activation of the plants to do all this healing work. That night at the end of the ceremony I called him and told him part of the story. It all worked out and we're friends now.

With every partner there has been a growing expansion with my sexuality which makes sense as we mature. With more experience we get more comfortable with our bodies. I started off not being comfortable with sex at all and then was with a woman 12 years. I've had lots of different experience. I remember being in a conversation about sexual submission and domination with mixed company, something really seductive for me, and thinking that before boahuasca I would have been mortified, left, and returned when they had finished. There was such a love vibe going on. For me there something about ayahuasca that takes this form, not always but sometimes, and I wonder if it is ayahuasca or ecstasy. But this is all boahuasca. I know that these things wouldn't have come up.

For me it goes back to sensual fantasies when I was a teenager of having sex with trees and then I set that aside and it didn't come back until working with ayahuasca and plants. It's not like sex of how we normally think about sex, it's like plants growing out of my uterus and giving birth from my belly button. And then things take on human form but are not human in dreams. I'm sure why I was drawn to this person in dream-time is that he had given the best massage after a ceremony. I had been working and my legs were sore from sitting a long time and the touch was erotic but not necessarily sexual. I had communication with this person and then he showed up in dream-time and I thought that if I wasn't partnered I would have been tempted. So in my dreams I've definitely had erotic experiences. Retrospectively I feel that they were erotic even though at the time I didn't experience them as such. There were very sensuous and when I think about it now they are erotic. My work in dreams are not just sleepy-time dreams but during my first diet in the latter six months I would drink and go to bed and have a two-hour session where downloads would come through. It was like dreams but not. All of my dreams since working with the plants have shifted. This was all based on my full commitment to the plants.

My teacher explained to me that at the beginning of a diet you just do what you're told and then later on he explained what I needed to do if I wanted a strong diet, like not to eat wet food. The idea is that you intentionally create an iron deficiency so you're not in your body as much and the longer you can stay in that state the better. If you're in more of the social diet then it's the standard things with what you can and can't have. You're really not bound by gravity or by the world, so the vital force that exists before manifestation in physical form comes to form with conception. So it's like the erotic energy shows up in diets and ceremonies. There's been a few times where I'm chanting to someone and I know they're having an erotic experience. One woman was moaning with the energy in her body, and it's OK as long as the practitioner is not taking advantage of this. Maybe there's a difference between how males and females experience sexuality during diets/ceremonies. I don't know. Maybe men can't get an erection during ceremonies. We bleed our energy when we have an orgasm. We all have an electrical charge and when we come together there is a little death in an orgasm. The question is, do you want an orgasm or do you want to build yourself up? What's happening now is that when I'm getting ready for ceremonies my sexual energy is off the charts. I don't know what this about. It's a really interesting time for me to observe this shift.

The plants have their own world and universe. Part of the world of a plant is the erotic nature of the plant. It's the plant

manifesting in a way that I can understand as a human being. In my experience most plants come in a masculine and feminine sense together although sometimes it's more masculine than feminine or more feminine than masculine. One plant came to me in the feminine form as an incredibly sensual lotus flower and the other half in the masculine form as guards that received signals from the universe. I think the plants are embodiments, healing energies, and carriers of forces that are helping us and helping themselves. They get to proliferate and hold our attention to ensure their own survival. They're looking for availability to proliferate and there are all these people dieting and getting ready to receive these plants. What a great opportunity. I think the plants are aware of that and they make it happen. How many times are people grateful for the plants and say the plants spoke to them. I think plants really are seizing these opportunities to communicate with us. Boahuasca doesn't come to me in a mental image but there's a powerful force that is erotic. For me all of the plants have a sensuous quality. I feel very connected to inter-galactic energies that come through, even the air. For example I'll have a feeling of the breath of the jungle that is sensuous. There's something very ripe like a steamy quality or in one ceremony it seemed like all of us had done MDMA. There was such a love vibe going on. There's something about ayahuasca that takes this form when I wondered if it was ayahuasca or ecstasy.

I think that shaman facilitators who abuse their power sexually during ceremonies are taking vital energy from women. I don't think it—I know it because I've seen it. In many ways that's the worst transgression. When you're dieting and doing your work you don't need to take anything from anyone but if you're not doing your work and slipping and you have all these people coming to you who are really clear with lots of vital energy. It's like a kid in a candy store for a practitioner who knows what they're doing. And you have someone coming to you that is enthralled and they mistake the medicine for the person pouring the medicine. There are a disproportionate number of women going to ceremonies who have a history of sexual trauma and how interesting that they are the ones practitioners tend to take advantage of. And then there may be women who actually like it, thinking they're special because the shaman is paying attention to them. When you're in a position of power there really is no such thing as consent when there are psychotropics involved.

As I empower myself by being aware of my inherent nature a shift from domination to cooperation will happen. A shift into fun-loving experiences of sex is possible instead of [it] being an act of submission. I get to leave behind the garbage idea that I was a whore if I enjoyed sex. If we are empowered sexually, spiritually, mystically, emotionally, and intellectually we have the means to

protect ourselves and safeguard ourselves from acts of violence. We actually get to develop ourselves as human beings and bring back to life the many parts that have been suppressed by male dominance. It's not power over it's being empowered – in power. The perception that working with plants is male dominated is just a perception because I feel it is not true. If women want to come together to work on projects that's great as long as it doesn't come at the expense of males. It's important to be careful. I'm not anti-male at all, but there are women who are because they haven't healed. It's about how many women heal their wounds so the message is clear that it's loving ourselves and not rejecting males. It's important to take the message to men. If a woman is able to completely trust a man in ceremony the potential for healing is huge. What better affirmation is there to experience healing with a man who works in integrity and there's a good outcome? Each case is different and each person needs to choose who best to work with. My hope is that not only are women educated but that men are also educated to teach them the skills and tools by which not to engage in transgressions that they're not even aware of, like flip sexual comments. I can see how a male participant could be enchanted by a female practitioner. We can't say that because we're women we're above all of it. We have to be really vigilant in our work and not to take credit for the healing work.

Psychoanalysis and talk therapy are in the realm of consensus reality in a way of being self-aware. Self-awareness disappears with the plants. Therapy is what happened in the past—how are you feeling now and how are you going to handle the future—as opposed to being completely immersed in an experience where the analytical and judgmental mind is gone. For me, ceremonies consistently present an opportunity for a non-linguistic experience and when you're dialed in the processing is beyond words. There is a reworking and re-wiring going on. The plants are jump-starting our systems on many levels, not just a physical level. They are saying "OK, I have information for how you can operate optimally." I think the plants are embodiments, healing energies, and carriers of forces that are helping us and helping themselves. They get to proliferate and hold our attention to ensure their own survival. They're looking for availability to proliferate and there are all these people dieting and getting ready to receive these plants. What a great opportunity. I think the plants are aware of that and they make it happen. How many times are people grateful for the plants and say the plants spoke to them? I think plants really are seizing these opportunities to communicate with us.

Exemplary Portraits

In heuristic research a few exemplary portraits of selected coresearchers are provided to represent all the coresearchers as a whole. These portraits are based on the individual depictions including the essential features of the coresearcher's experience as well as demographic and autobiographic information. The exemplary portraits describe the phenomenon investigated and the specific coresearcher so that they "are unique to the individuals yet characterize the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 50). To honor the heuristic inquiry methodology as conceptualized by Moustakas (1990), I include a modified version of the individual portrait quotations in the exemplary portrait, individual themes, and core themes sections. This repetition was necessary to drill deeper, seek clarity, and become more accustomed to the meaning, intent, and purpose behind each dialogue. I thank the readers for their patience with the process.

Exemplary Portrait—Maia.

Maia is a 41-year-old, single woman with three children. She has been an elder home care nurse for over a decade. Her parents, two sisters, and brother travelled around the world for her father's work. Maia was born in Seoul, Korea and raised in Korea, Hawaii, the Philippines, China, and Arizona and Colorado in the United States. Her mom was raised Mormon and her dad was raised Catholic, and Maia grew up with the influences of Christianity and Buddhism while living abroad. Maia

doesn't claim to have a connection with a particular religion but resonates with the foundational philosophies of many. She thinks of herself as a spiritual person and views God in all things. Maia decided to drink ayahuasca in traditional ceremonies in 2006 after witnessing a family member's deep healing process with this Amazonian plant. Over the next six years she participated in over fifty ayahuasca ceremonies, and dieted ajo sachá for six months and marosa for three months.

Maia recognized that her avoidance of healing past sexual trauma was manifesting as addictive self-destructive behavior and poor physical health.

I knew that the sickness that ruled my life was a sexually oriented sickness. I had endometriosis and pelvic and uterine pain all the time. I was supposed to get my uterus removed and had menstrual cycles where I was bleeding constantly for six months at a time. I had physical sickness that I knew was a result of sexual abuse as a child....Before I started dieting plants I had more partners than I want to mention. There was a ridiculous amount of lack of discretion in sexual partners; men, women, married, unmarried, someone I knew, someone I didn't know. It didn't matter because it was impulsive and the language of seeking. It's the same as seeking drugs and trying anything, LSD, mushrooms, ecstasy. I was seeking but in the wrong direction. I think my sexuality in the past was evidence of how deep my sickness was but also evidence of my desire to be healthy.

After years of marriage Maia realized she could no longer stay in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship with her husband. She left the marriage with the help of her family's emotional and financial support. Maia felt it took her a long time to leave because of an attachment to her victim identity. "There was an identity I had created around being sick with

my sexuality that I wasn't ready to let go of yet. There was some victimization that I was hanging onto that took a lot to let go of."

She knew that she desperately needed physical, emotional and spiritual healing in order to survive. During her first diet with ajo sachá Maia felt a deep spiritual cleaning.

This particular plant is to clear up baggage and in a ceremony I was shown what I was going to be cleaning up. Some of the visions were extremely disturbing and erotic as well. The images were of vampires, sex slaves, abuse of power, and men and women chained to stone walls in dungeons where they were sex slaves born in this role and they found ways to enjoy the role and play with this power.

Maia clearly articulated how a diet with ajo sachá supported her process of healing sexual trauma in her past.

There were the times I was molested, abused and raped when I was younger and the generational sickness around sexuality that I carry, that my family carries. It's a cellular memory. So the diet cleared this up and to know what's clean sexuality and what's a misuse of power sexuality. That was the purpose of the diet. There was an identity I had created around being sick with my sexuality that I wasn't ready to let go of yet. There was some victimization that I was hanging onto. Once I processed the shame of being the perpetrator and saw what I was capable of doing, I had compassion for both sides. After recovering from what I saw in terms of how sick we can be as humans and I was willing to accept the whole picture the healing happened pretty quickly.

Maia realized how the lens through which she perceived her reality was skewed and how the diet made a significant impact in aligning her with a more harmonious perspective.

Before the diet I saw everything through multiple layers of sickness. I couldn't tell what was reality, what was insecurity, what was my sickness or what was someone else's. You're looking at something through 15 different lenses and you don't know what's reality even though your intention is to be clear, but you don't know what's

clouding what. And post-diet it's so much clearer. You know what's yours and what's someone else and you know how to clean it off. You're not looking at past, present, future. You're only looking at the present. There's a huge difference. When you're reacting it's only in the present moment. When your reaction is disproportionate you're dealing with all kinds of cloudy issues. There's a huge difference in how you walk in the world. You're not walking as a damaged 1-year-old, 2-year-old, 6-year-old, and teenager.

After Maia's first diet she became aware of the importance of exchanging sexual energy in a "clean" way.

I don't think I'll ever be able to be in a sexual relationship with anyone in a carefree way. I'm so much more aware of what it actually means to exchange energy. I won't want to expose myself to someone's energy if they're not clean or there are only a few times when I'm clean enough to expose my energy to someone else. I've abused sexual energy so much and for so long that I'm totally not interested until I know I'm going to be totally clean with it.

She may have felt unprepared for an intimate relationship with a human partner, however, she experienced being in a symbiotic intimate relationship with the plant spirit of ajo sachá. This phenomenon has been described in the *vegetalismo* literature as a "plant spirit marriage."

When I dieted ajo sachá he introduced himself to me and told me that we were going to be lovers and that our worlds were going to be interconnected, from everything mundane as doing the dishes to things as complicated as spirit traveling and my healing work. In that conversation with the ajo sachá plant spirit there was trust developing and saying that we would be interwoven and walking together. I asked the spirit, "What's in it for you? Why would you clean me out?" The answer was, "The human body is the most incredible playground ever and if you can maintain an environment (i.e., no salt, no sugar) so that I can stay in your body, it's the funniest playground of all—to see things from a human perspective—in a human body—to be able to move in a way that I've never been able to move before." In that I understood what he meant by being a lover and the idea of a plant entering the human kingdom and a human entering the plant kingdom. It's just as foreign to both of us and a mutually beneficial thing, which is kind of erotic in its own way.

Maia found her healing process was a huge relief but that there was some fear in not knowing what to do next. She had to admit to herself that it was necessary to change behavior patterns in order to be healthy and balanced.

The energetic spaces needed to be healed and I needed to take responsibility for what I was going to put back into those empty spaces...learning to not repeat the pattern of filling those spaces with more sickness and learning to guard those spaces and what to put there or how to leave them open.

Maia stated that it was difficult to learn to be her own gatekeeper in staying safe and living in integrity. "It's been a hard lesson, first how to trust, how to trust appropriately, and who to trust. I've learned the hard way to trust my own intuition over other people that I have high respect for. "

Maia spoke about a very challenging situation during her second diet when she became aware of the shadow side of vegetarianism.

Shamans, even extremely potent and powerful healers, are human and have their own illnesses and sometimes do things out of their own state of illness. Earlier on I put the shaman in the position of a guru where I completely surrendered and I was mistaken in doing that.

When Maia found out that the vegetarian who was supervising her diet was having sexual relations with his female patient Maia immediately stopped her diet.

When I heard about his indiscretions I was reactive and pulled away from the tradition all together and quit my diet early because I didn't want to be connected with a tradition that was not respectful to women. He may be healthy at some point, but I won't be part of the sickness and that's where the intuition comes in, because if it doesn't feel right then I won't be a part of it.

Maia found that discovering a deeper bodily intelligence during her first diet was an ally in the process of navigating challenging experiences.

The diet has helped me fine-tune it so when my intuition is talking to me and I'm not listening I will stop everything and figure out what I'm supposed to be listening to. When I have that kind of clarity and discipline it's easily dealt with. When I ignore the gut feeling and I'm busy being angry or distracted it can progress to sickness and more anger. The body ups the ante so the gut ache turns into double-over pain that can turn into diarrhea and other things. The body will keep trying to get your attention and if you continue to not listen I think it turns into cancer and really deep diseases.

Enhancing her ability to listen to her intuition fostered an opening with spirit.

The diets have helped me get clear communication between me and my soul. I think that intuition is the dialogue between my earthly self and my soul...that there's a dialogue that happens between my higher self and my humanness. My soul is connected to the Great Spirit or God so that's the umbilical cord between my humanness and God. There is an actual dialogue that sometimes is in symbols, language and dreams.

Overall Maia feels the plant diets highlighted her longing to be well and enabled her to have greater communication with her soul & God.

The diet taught me discipline, out of sheer survival how to call for help. Through making the decision daily to stay on the diet it reinforced my decision to heal and be well. It helped me through all the parts that lead me to believe that I deserved to be well. I became stronger because that's the connection to being well, however you define well. What the diet is doing is clearing out space and putting in God, however you define it. So spiritually I had a much richer life because there was more space for God. Ultimately my goal in life is to be more connected with Spirit. All of these feelings of sickness are feelings of home-sickness for God.

Maia's journey with Amazonian plant teachers, comprised of over fifty ayahuasca ceremonies and diets with ajo sachá and marosa, healed aspects of her physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual life. Maia

recovered from endometriosis and her menstrual cycles became more regulated. She left an abusive marriage and energetically began healing her own sexual abuse trauma as well as that of her ancestral lineage. Maia learned how to protect her emotional and psychic space and strengthened her connection with God.

Exemplary portrait—Electra.

Electra is a 52-year-old woman living with her partner in a large urban city. She was adopted as an infant at six months of age. Her sister was also adopted as an infant and is five years older than Electra. Electra was born in Philadelphia and remained in that area until she was 27 years old. She was raised Roman Catholic and went to parochial school from kindergarten through 12th grade and was baptized and confirmed.

Electra's ethnic heritage is Ukrainian, Polish, and Eastern European. Her father (now deceased) was of Russian and Polish descent and Electra's mother (now deceased) was of Ukrainian and Russian descent. In her early 20s Electra began exploring other spiritual practices and religious studies, which over the years encompassed Buddhism, Hinduism, yoga, meditation, plant wisdom, native North American practices, and Agape.

Electra first connected with ayahuasca in 2003 through an invitation by her yoga teacher to join a ceremony. At the time of her first ceremony she had been abstinent from all alcohol and drugs as well as maintaining a restricted diet. After the ceremony, she came to the deep realization that the 13 years prior to her first ceremony had been preparing her work with

Amazonian plant teachers. Electra said she stopped counting years ago but she believes she has participated in approximately 700 ceremonies. She has dieted marosa, tobacco, and aire sacha medicinally for one year each, aire sacha cosmica for 11 months, boahuasca for five months, coca between one and three months on five separate occasions, toe and ayahuasca for three months, pinon blanco for one month, pinon morado for one month, and ayahuma for one month.

Electra journeyed deeper into the plant world by answering a call to heal her physical health.

I had an ovarian cyst when I was young and then another one when I received information during a ceremony that there was something growing on my ovary that was confirmed by an ultrasound. Surgery was recommended but I thought that even though I could have surgery to take out a body part there would still be something growing. A hysterectomy was suggested by the doctor and instead I realized I needed to work with plants. Boahuasca was calling me.

Electra knew she also needed to reflect on her intimate relationships and come to terms with the state of her marriage.

During the purge I felt a divine love for my husband. I felt that I've let him go and the expectations I had of him as my husband were gone so I can really love not the kind of love that I want to be with him. I was able to hold him in that space of love which I hadn't been able to do for years. The emotional part was an result of the prompting asking myself do I really love my husband, no I don't, and do I really want to go on like this, no I don't. So it really took the activation of the plants to do all this healing work.

Electra experienced healing on a physical level as well as on an emotional level and after she separated from her husband she opened her heart to a new partner.

I felt this attraction for the teacher and he came to do a consult on my property and there was energy between us. He had had the experience of a non-ordinary state of consciousness with plants and understood there was a connection that he would explore later. When he met me he thought it was all coming together. One thing lead to another and we didn't do anything sexual but the sexual energy between us was high. I was dieting boahuasca and not supposed to have sexual thoughts and the plant was healing my sexual reproductive organs. But I still fell in love with this guy. We laugh because it was a plant conspiracy.

Electra spoke about her sexual history and acknowledged her maturation process and how her comfort zone changed after her diet with Boahuasca.

With every partner there has been a growing expansion with my sexuality which makes sense as we mature. With more experience we get more comfortable with our bodies. I started off not being comfortable with sex at all and then was with a woman for 12 years. I've had lots of different experience. I remember being in a conversation about sexual submission and domination with mixed company, something really seductive for me, and thinking that before Boahuasca I would have been mortified, left, and returned when they had finished....Boahuasca doesn't come to me in a mental image but there's a powerful force that is erotic.

It wasn't just a divine love connection; it was an erotic hot and sexual thing.

Electra described how her connection with nature was reignited after she first began drinking plant teachers and how ayahuasca revealed the sensuousness in life.

It goes back to sensual fantasies when I was a teenager of having sex with trees and then I set that aside and it didn't come back until working with ayahuasca and plants. It's not like sex of how we normally think about sex, it's like plants growing out of my uterus and giving birth from my belly button....For me all of the plants have a sensuous quality but it's not just the plants. I feel very connected to inter-galactic energies that come through, even the air. For example I'll have a feeling of the breath of the jungle that is sensuous. There's something very ripe, it's hard to put into words, it's like a steamy quality or in one of the ceremonies it seemed like

all of us had done MDMA. There was such a love vibe going on. For me there something about ayahuasca that takes this form, not always but sometimes, and I wonder if it is ayahuasca or ecstasy.

Electra shared her perceptions of sexual energy in ceremonies and during diets.

I lived in a state of altered consciousness for weeks with Boahuasca and all this sexual healing was going on but the irony was that I wasn't able to have sex with my husband....The first thing that comes to mind for me as a result of participating in ceremonies is how an erotic experience is better than sex. I believe when we diet and abstain from sexual thoughts there is a build up of vital sexual energy. So there's an expression of sexuality during ceremony that is erotic and satisfying that doesn't include sexual acts....We bleed our energy when we have an orgasm. We all have an electrical charge and when we come together there is a little death in an orgasm. The question is do you want an orgasm or do you want to build yourself up. What's happening now is that when I'm getting ready for ceremonies my sexual energy is off the charts. I don't know what this about. It's a really interesting time for me to observe this shift.

Electra clearly stated her views about the shadow side of sexuality within the practice of vegetalismo and the ethics of ensuring the safety of ayahuasca drinkers in ceremony.

I think that shaman facilitators who abuse their power sexually during ceremonies are taking vital energy from women. I don't think it I know it because I've seen it. In many ways that's the worst transgression. When you're dieting and doing your work you don't need to take anything from anyone, but if you're not doing your work and slipping and you have all these people coming to you who are really clear with lots of vital energy. It's like a kid in a candy store for a practitioner who knows what they're doing. And you have someone coming to you that is enthralled and they mistake the medicine for the person pouring the medicine. There are a disproportionate number of women going to ceremonies who have a history of sexual trauma, and how interesting that they are the ones practitioners tend to take advantage of. And then there may be women who actually like it, thinking they're special because the shaman is paying attention to them. When you're in a position of

power there really is no such thing as consent when there are psychotropics involved.

Electra eloquently distinguished the difference between power over and fostering empowerment:

As I empower myself by being aware of my inherent nature a shift from domination to cooperation will happen. A shift into fun-loving experiences of sex is possible instead of [it] being an act of submission. I get to leave behind the garbage idea that I was a whore if I enjoyed sex. If we are empowered sexually, spiritually, mystically, emotionally, and intellectually we have the means to protect ourselves and safeguard ourselves from acts of violence. We actually get to develop ourselves as human beings and bring back to life the many parts that have been suppressed by male dominance. It's not power over it's being empowered – in power.

In summary, Electra's journey with plant teachers encompasses healing on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions.

Electra's ovarian cysts disappeared, preventing the need for a hysterectomy, and she experienced heightened sexual energy. She became clear about her desire to have a passionate intimate relationship, and once she separated from her husband she was able to open her heart to a new relationship. Electra experienced a renewed confidence and received clarity about the significance of liberation that included advocating for women's safety and empowerment in ayahuasca ceremonies. She strengthened the connection with her spirit allies, and began to honor her soul's contact and share her gift as a healer.

Categories and Individual Themes

To explore how erotic experiences with Amazonian plant teachers can transform the quality of the women's sexual/spiritual lives, the

individual themes in each of the coresearcher's reported experiences were identified. The next step required the extraction of reoccurring themes that appear to be central elements for the entire group. I reread all transcripts and individual depictions and identified four categories (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) within which the individual themes could be placed. I then identified repetitive core themes for the entire group of coresearchers. A core theme was acknowledged if it emerged in at least three of the coresearchers' descriptions. The individual themes identified are as follows.

Table 1
Categories and Individual Themes

| Category | Individual themes |
|----------------------|---|
| Physical and sensory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening energy channels (Asterope) • Recovering from ovarian cyst (Taygeta) • Receiving support during pregnancy and childbirth (Taygeta) • Cleansing reproductive system (Alcyone) • Transitioning into menopause (Merope) • Recovering from endometriosis (Maia) • Reprogramming the nervous system (Maia) • Listening to gut communication (Maia) • Activating kundalini energy (Celaeno) • Reversing the need for a hysterectomy (Electra) • Increasing olfactory awareness (Electra) • Increasing sexual energy (Electra) |
| Emotional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Releasing aggression (Asterope) • Recognizing the wounds of others (Asterope) • Correlating physical pain with emotional mindset (Asterope) • Healing relationships with men and family members (Taygeta) |

| Category | Individual themes |
|----------|---|
| Mental | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiencing wholeness of being (Taygeta) • Honoring self needs (Taygeta) • Feeling love for ceremonial plant-drinkers (Taygeta) • Purging energy for perpetrator (Merope) • Realizing one's sexual nature (Merope) • Clearing the cellular memory of sexual trauma (Maia) • Releasing identification with sexual trauma (Maia) • Enhancing trust in self (Maia) • Securing healed parts of self (Maia) • Increasing creativity (Celaeno) • Honoring feminine sexual identity (Celaeno) • Recognizing one's own power (Electra) • Feeling unconditional love for one's husband (Electra) • Opening heart to a romantic relationship (Electra) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing sexual behavioral patterns (Asterope) • Calming the mind (Taygeta) • Learning assertiveness and discernment (Taygeta) • Developing boundaries with sexual energy (Alcyone) • Abstaining from sexual relations (Merope) • Enhancing awareness in romantic relationships (Merope) • Focusing energy with clear intention (Merope) • Perceiving reality with clarity (Maia) • Increasing awareness of energy exchange (Maia) • Enhancing discipline (Maia) • Protecting one's energetic space (Maia) • Listening to intuition (Maia) • Learning from challenges (Celaeno) • Liberating self-confidence (Electra) • Expanding capacity to receive plant teachings (Electra) |

| Category | Individual themes |
|-----------|---|
| Spiritual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discerning between positive & negative energies (Asterope) • Learning how all life is interconnected (Taygeta) • Experiencing sexual unions with animals (Taygeta) • Discovering life force as sexual energy (Alcyone) • Recognizing challenges of energy transference (Alcyone) • Interpreting spirit attacks as sexual seduction (Alcyone) • Feeling possessed by a non-physical energy (Merope) • Experimenting with sexual fantasies (Merope) • Relating symbiotically with plant spirits (Maia) • Perceiving dark visions (Maia) • Finding space for God (Maia) • Strengthening communication between one's Soul and God (Maia) • Experiencing sexual unions with plant spirits (Celaeno) • Discovering sexual fulfillment with plant spirits (Electra) • Becoming aware of spiritual marriages with plant spirits (Electra) |

Note. Author's table.

The Nine Core Themes

Once the individual themes were identified, I looked for similar themes that could be amalgamated into core themes. The central features of at least a third of all coresearchers were captured in these core themes. The core themes are listed below, followed by the individual themes subsumed.

Table 2
Nine core themes

| Core theme | Individual themes included |
|--|--|
| Purification and support for reproductive health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recovering from ovarian cyst • Receiving support during pregnancy and childbirth • Cleansing reproductive system • Reversing the need for a hysterectomy • Transitioning into menopause • Recovering from endometriosis |
| Increased sensory awareness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening the energy channels • Reprogramming the nervous system • Listening to gut communication • Increasing olfactory awareness • Increasing sexual energy |
| Healing sexual abuse trauma | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Releasing aggression • Correlating physical pain with emotional mindset • Purging energy for perpetrator' • Clearing the cellular memory of sexual trauma • Releasing identification with sexual trauma |
| Transformation of relationship with self | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honoring self needs • Realizing one's sexual nature • Enhancing trust in self • Increasing creativity • Honoring feminine sexual identity • Recognizing one's own power • Experiencing wholeness of being |
| Empowered decision-making | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming one's gatekeeper • Developing boundaries with sexual |

| Core theme | Individual themes included |
|---------------------------------|---|
| | energy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced discipline • Protecting one's energetic space • Protecting healed parts of self • Listening to intuition • Learning assertiveness and discernment |
| Enhanced intimacy with others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the wounds of others • Feeling love for ceremonial plant-drinkers • Healing relationships with men and family members • Abstaining from sexual relations • Enhanced awareness in romantic relationships • Feeling love for husband • Opening heart to a romantic relationship • Using plants as an aphrodisiac |
| Enhanced cognitive awareness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing sexual behavioral patterns • Calming the mind • Focusing energy with clear intention • Perceiving reality with clarity • Increasing awareness of energy exchange • Learning from challenges • Liberating self-confidence • Expanding capacity to receive plant teachings |
| Connecting with subtle energies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discerning between positive & negative energies • Experiencing sexual unions with animal and plant spirits |

| Core theme | Individual themes included |
|---------------------|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing challenges of transference with subtle energies • Interpreting spirit attacks as sexual seduction • Experiencing a symbiotic marriage with plant spirits • Perceiving dark visions • Experimenting with sexual fantasies |
| Connecting with God | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning how all life is interconnected • Discovering life force as sexual energy • Finding space for God • Strengthening communication between one's Soul and God |

Note. Author's table.

These nine core themes capture erotic experiences in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets that represent the experiences of all the coresearchers. The themes will be explored in greater detail in the following sections by using exemplifying quotes from the original transcripts.

Purification and support for reproductive health.

The discussion will begin by exploring transformation on the physical level because all the coresearchers emphasized how plant teachers helped to re-establish a connection with their bodies. Several of the women dieted plant teachers with the intention of curing physical reproductive ailments. Within the Western medical system three women

were diagnosed with ovarian cysts, one woman was diagnosed with requiring a hysterectomy, and one woman was diagnosed as infertile. Coresearchers reported that all of these physical imbalances were healed after dieting plants. The coresearchers also stated that they felt supported through reproductive phases such as menstruation, fertility, and menopause. Many of the coresearchers commented on how drinking plants helped to clear their energetic channels so they could feel more sensual pleasure with human and non-human beings.

Taygeta and Electra started drinking plants to cure an ovarian cyst and Electra said she experienced reversing the need for a hysterectomy.

“I started out dieting boahausca for an ovarian cyst and then it turned into a spirit healing. The cyst went away which was confirmed by an ultra sound.” (Taygeta)

I had an ovarian cyst when I was young and then another one when I received information during a ceremony that there was something growing on my ovary, which was confirmed by an ultrasound. Surgery was recommended but I thought that even though I could have surgery to take out a body part there would still be something growing. A hysterectomy was suggested by the doctor and instead I decided that I needed to work with plants. Boahuasca was calling me....Three months after dieting boahuasca I had an ultra sound that showed the cyst was decreasing and ultimately the cyst was no longer there. (Electra)

Taygeta described her symbiotic relationship with chai, which supported her during the delivery of her baby girl. She highlighted the symbolic correlation between the experience of going through a challenging ceremony and delivering her baby.

During my second chai diet, at the nine-month mark, I had a very strong dream that told me I needed to close my diet. I was sad because I [was] wanting to complete the year diet and I felt so

good, but the message was so strong that I could not ignore it. So I closed and I had some blood work done. I was curious, being a nurse, what our body goes through. My body was very tired and a bit depleted. My iron was so low my doctor couldn't believe I was walking and hiking. So I had four months during the summer to replenish my body. I took iron and within two weeks I felt stronger. I incorporated all the non-diet foods...I had a feeling my body was preparing for a baby and in October I conceived. Without that strong message during the diet I would have been on the diet until September, and I believe I wouldn't have been strong enough to conceive. It all was perfectly aligned. During the birth chai was very much present. In a ceremony and on the diet you go to your edge and experience dark nights of the soul. Knowing that I could experience this helped me go through the labor because I was taken to my edge. It was meditation and breathing, being still, and listening that got me through. During the final push I called on the work with the plant medicines.

Alcyone was impacted by how ayahuasca may have increased the chances of having a healthy baby.

The shaman cleaned my organs, uterus, and ovaries. My initial reaction was to push away and I got defensive. When he was working on me I felt sharp pain. I told him later that I wanted to have a child and the shaman told me that if he hadn't done the work, there could have been a disturbance.

Merope received confirmation in an ayahuasca ceremony that she would not need to have a hysterectomy.

When I was in a ceremony in Peru part of my story was experiencing excruciating pain. A past life story that I'd been shown was that my child died and I died while giving birth. I kept saying the first night "I am not having a hysterectomy," and I heard the shaman say, "You're healthy and not going to have a hysterectomy," and I knew I was going to be okay.

Celaeno gracefully transitioned through menopause. "I'm of the menopausal age and I've had symptoms of hot flashes, but nothing has been off the charts...overall just a lot more energy. This has been interesting and informing me another way."

Increased sensory awareness.

All the women stated that their energy channels were cleared which increased their capacity to receive more information from all sensory levels. There was also an expansion of how to feel sexual energy during diets when they were not able to masturbate or have sexual relations with others.

The first diet created a lot of sensation in my energy body and some of it was sexual for me, a lot of physical energy. In a ceremony during my first diet, the experience I felt was very sexual, but there was no engaging in sex because I was on the diet. I tried to channel that energy in a different way. I could feel every molecule in my body that came up in a sexual way. I could feel all my senses. (Asterope)

“My sexual energy returned through an energy channel that I had shut down because I knew it wasn’t an option during the diet.”
(Alcyone)

The more sensitive Maia became, the more she was able to listen to the cues her body gave her when she was in and out of balance.

When I ignore the gut feeling and I’m busy being angry or distracted it can progress to sickness and more anger. The body ups the ante so the gut ache turns into double-over pain that can turn to into diarrhea and other things. The body will keep trying to get your attention and if you continue to not listen I think it turns into cancer and really deep diseases.

Celaeno experienced an increase of what can be described as kundalini energy: “I felt energy in my spine and a lot more joy and expressiveness....It feels like the energy I had in the genital area is now surging upwards in my body and fusing me with different energy.”

Electra commented on how her sexual energy is extremely potent after years of drinking plants and having periods of celibacy.

Abstaining from sex raises our vital life force. The more energy we have to bring to the experience, the better potential for the experience exists. We bleed our energy when we have an orgasm. We all have an electrical charge and when we come together there is a little death in an orgasm. The question is—do you want an orgasm or do you want to build yourself up? But what’s happening now is that when I’m getting ready for ceremony my sexual energy is off the charts. I don’t know what this about. It’s a really interesting time for me to observe this shift.

Healing sexual abuse trauma.

Five of the seven coresearchers reported having a history of sexual abuse trauma and that their healing journey included releasing shame, bitterness, and grief during ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets. One coresearcher became much more aware of the aggression toward herself and of the correlation between physical pain and emotional mindset.

First there was a rigidity of seeing my boundaries as not important as the closeness that I wanted. There’s a real harshness about this and how it was played out in my history, particularly as a young person...making those boundaries really rigid and doing it in a hard way. Saying to myself, “You’ve made some really fucked up choices and you’re not going to do that again” in a really aggressive way. There was an aggression towards myself and my sexuality that scared the shit out of me.

The ovarian cyst is gone but there’s still pain. Periodically it will come out of nowhere. I know it’s my right ovary even though I know the cyst isn’t there but the pain is there. Then the pain goes away and I say “Oh, that’s just life.” Maybe there’s an emotional mindset of my personal frustration thinking that it all comes down to relationships, and I spend all my time putting up boundaries against this. How do I even open to this and try to figure out how to relax? Then I get caught in the stories of not knowing if I can do it and that’s when the pain comes up. When I let go of that the pain tends to ease off. (Asterope)

Merope reported how plant teachers cleared sexual trauma on a cellular level:

I had this dream that I was transported back to being five or six and someone made a move that was affecting me at that time. When I said “no” a cylinder canister about eight inches around and three feet tall poured out letters of the alphabet soup. I knew that this was being cleared. I saw it being cleared. (Merope)

Merope shared how she not only cleared the energy of her own sexual trauma but also the energy she absorbed from the sexual perpetrator who was a family member.

I had something happen with a relative who had passed that was very ill and had sexually abused who knows how many children. I was visiting someone very ill, a woman in a hospital, and I heard someone say, “Touch her.” I turned around and it was my grandfather. I later had an opportunity in an ayahuasca ceremony to hear beings say, “Don’t worry, we’re taking him out of your field. Just sit down and we’ll take care of it.” I felt the energy being lifted from me and it was gone.

Maia explained how generational sickness was passed on through cellular memories. She believed that although she was the survivor of sexual abuse in this life she could have been the perpetrator in a past life and that forgiving both the survivor and the perpetrator archetypes was key to her healing.

I knew that the sickness that ruled my life was a sexually oriented sickness. I had endometriosis and pelvic and uterine pain all the time. I was supposed to get my uterus removed and had menstrual cycles where I was bleeding constantly for six months at a time. I had physical sickness that I knew was a result of sexual abuse as a child....For me the ajo sachá cleaned out the cellular memory of the generations of sexual abuse. The marosa helped me to deal with the grief, the emotions and compassion that I needed to heal.

There were the times I was molested, abused, and raped when I was younger. The generational sickness around sexuality that I carry and that my family carries is a cellular memory. So the diet cleared this up and [helped me] to know what’s clean sexuality and what’s a misuse of power sexuality. That was the purpose of the diet.

There was an identity I had created around being sick with my sexuality that I wasn't ready to let go of yet. There was some victimization that I was hanging onto. Once I processed the shame of being the perpetrator and saw what I was capable of doing, I had compassion for both sides. After recovering from what I saw in terms of how sick we can be as humans and I was willing to accept the whole picture the healing happened pretty quickly.

Transforming relationship with self.

Taygeta explained how the plant she dieted for one year, chai, increased her self-confidence which prepared her for motherhood.

Chai was a protector and taught me how to be spiky on the outside and strong within myself. That was my challenge in life in terms of being pushed around and indecisive. So I feel chai was preparing me to be a mom and be solid within myself, to be more assertive in my life, and have a purpose in my life. I'm so grateful for all of this. The plants taught me discernment.

Merope's perception of her sexual identity changed during a diet when she was not able to have sexual relations. "I'm a sexual being whether I'm having sex with someone or not. I don't need to feel like I'm excluding it, but that I know it's my nature."

Merope and Maia share how they learned to protect their energetic space and trust their intuition.

"This is the time in my life for me and that is clear. The diet made me much more fierce in protecting myself." (Merope)

I saw the key of being your own gatekeeper in what and who you allow to be part of the healing. But it's been a hard lesson in how to trust appropriately and who to trust. I've learned the hard way to trust my own intuition over other people. (Maia)

Maia explained the paradox of feeling weak and strong simultaneously. "I felt physically weak and spiritually rock solid but there's

a balance. I was physically weak and anyone could take me out in five seconds but they couldn't touch the part that was healed or my soul."

Celaeno described how she learned how to honor her feminine sexual identity and express herself more creatively.

My intentions are to help me navigate through the fear. Fear is like a convulsing dog. I'm gravitating towards a gentler way—a feminine way. I've been living in a masculine way for so long and the plants are guiding me to a safe, caring, and gentler way. What plants have done for me is tap me into the Divine feminine— motherhood, womanhood, and daughterhood—and to be able to tap into this and help other people tap into it. Getting into those deep internal resonances that women have with what it means to be a woman, whether their connection is guarded, defensive, beautiful, or harmonious has made me a lot stronger being a woman.

I'm grateful for what I'm able to feel in my body. There's so much more play and song. I come from a Celtic lineage and someone said we are all like leprechauns and we all sing. I am intrinsically musical and I get the message that I'm supposed to be communicating in a musical way. Now I have no hesitation to make sound and be spontaneous and feel joy.

Electra shared how the sexual taboos she adopted as a young adult were transformed in her psyche.

As I empower myself by being aware of my inherent nature a shift from domination to cooperation will happen. A shift into fun loving experiences of sex is possible instead of [it] being an act of submission. I get to leave behind the garbage idea that I was a whore if I enjoyed sex.

Empowered decision-making.

The coresearchers talked about how they witnessed changes in the behavior in the areas of boundaries, discipline, protection, behavioral patterns, decision-making, and intuition. Asterope explained the change by saying "The plants have taught me to be careful and guarded with

sexual connections I make with people in day-to-day life. On this path we have to be careful because we're so open and we develop sensitivities."

Alcyone developed important boundaries with her sexual energy and became aware of the role her ego played.

I see really clearly how I gave energy to men. I had an experience during the marosa diet and then there were all these men in my life. I felt really charged up by all of that and saw how destructive that was. I need to hold my energy carefully and only give energy to my partner. I'm much more clear in my boundaries. I notice when I'm giving and check whether it's my ego and why I'm doing it. I've noticed more guys wanting energy and how much men are pulling energy from me. I've kept it in a place of not going any further.

Merope was clear about the importance of focusing her energy and making choices with adult consciousness.

I believe that we come here for a reason. It's a 50–50 participation, folks. We signed up for a lesson and we can choose to be the victim or not. It's a choice as conscious adults to ascribe to whatever story we want to. It's up to us as conscious adults to make the decision of where to put our energy.

Many of the coresearchers spoke about becoming more disciplined; Maia and Asterope connected this with their desire to heal, protect their energetic space, and listen more intently to their intuition.

The diet taught me discipline, out of sheer survival—how to call for help. Through making the decision daily to stay on the diet it reinforced my decision to heal and be well. It helped me through all the parts that led me to believe that I deserved to be well. (Maia)

The energetic spaces needed to be healed and I had to take responsibility for what to put back into those empty spaces. I learned to not repeat the pattern of filling those spaces with more sickness and instead to guard those spaces and what to put there or how to leave them open. (Maia)

The diet has helped me fine-tune it so when my intuition is talking to me and I'm not listening I will stop everything and figure out what

I'm supposed to be listening to. When I have that kind of clarity and discipline it's easily dealt with. (Asterope)

Enhanced intimacy with others.

Asterope was able to recognize with greater sensitivity how the wounds of others were interwoven with her own wounds.

I was at the closing of my diet and being with a new thing that was unfolding with someone. Allowing for the sexual energy to be present and not engaging in it. My wounds are only half the story and [I was] wondering if I can manage someone else's wounds.

Taygeta describes feeling unconditional love for her fellow plant drinkers in an ayahuasca ceremony. "I remember feeling pure bliss and the setting was amazing. I wanted to make out with everyone in the room, not in a sexual way but in a loving way to express my love."

Taygeta shared how her relationship with men and her mother transformed as her perception of what it means to be a woman shifted.

Plants have helped me to find a sense of wholeness in my relations as a woman with other women and with men. It's given me an incredible amount of strength to move forward in relationships when the waters are murky and complicated. I found my own wholeness of being, of being intimate, owning it—and not necessarily seeking it out with men because I already have it innately.

My relationship with my own mother has strengthened. It's helped me to clarify my relationship with her, which was problematic when I was younger. Working with this medicine has given me a much deeper appreciation of her as a woman, the choices that she's made, and the person that she is now. This has helped me to heal those wounds, release them and move on. It's been a beautiful process with my mother.

Merope received information during a ceremony about why she desired to be abstinent until she learned how to be a healthy sexual being

and why she needed to make empowered decisions in romantic relationships.

Something in my subconscious was telling me that it would have been more difficult if I had children. I don't know if it's the plants or the discipline that has taught me because it's been so long since I've had intercourse. One of the reasons I didn't have intercourse was because I was afraid of becoming pregnant. So abstinence was the best policy for me.

In an ayahuasca ceremony I had the experience of clearing old abuse, sexual abuse issues that I believe were cleared from my field to be a healthier sexual being. When I do engage again sexually I want it to be a more spiritual union than a pulling needy situation....I'm way more interested in quality so that's one of the reasons I haven't been seeking it or why it hasn't shown up. As much as I enjoy sex it doesn't matter if it happens again. I don't know that it does. I can't predict every situation. I want to know which decision will leave me the most empowered and leave me with the least regret. It's not about being in the moment—as fun as it is—it's about the implications down the road, not wanting to cause harm to another person and to be as clear as possible about where I'm at. I realize that for me I'm working to choose situations that are clear where there's no pull. I do a lot of considering and a lot of observing. I think about it a lot and [I'm] not wanting to do the drama thing. I'm waiting for a partner who understands what I'm trying to convey in regards to sharing energy. Merope

Electra was able to feel unconditional love for her husband which gave her the courage to ask for a divorce.

During the purge I felt a divine love for my husband. I felt that I let him go and the expectations I had of him as my husband were gone so I can really love...not the kind of love that I want to be with him. I was able to hold him in that space of love which I hadn't been able to do for years....The emotional part was a result of the prompting and asking myself am I really in love with my husband, no I am not, and do I really want to go on like this, no I don't. So it really took the activation of the plants to do all this healing work.

After Electra separated from her husband she was greatly appreciative of how the plants helped open her heart and bring new love into her life.

I felt this attraction for the teacher and he came to do a consult on my property and there was energy between us. He had had the experience of a non-ordinary state of consciousness with plants and understood there was a connection that he would explore later. When he met me he thought it was all coming together. One thing lead to another and we didn't do anything sexual but the sexual energy between us was high. I was dieting boahuasca and not supposed to have sexual thoughts and the plant was healing my sexual reproductive organs. But I still fell in love with this guy. We laugh because it was a plant conspiracy.

Electra experienced physical healing with boahuasca and after the diet she was able to integrate this plant energy into her sex life.

"I lived in a state of altered consciousness for weeks with boahuasca and all this sexual healing was going on but the irony was that I wasn't able to have sex. Now I drink or chant boahuasca with love-making."

Enhanced cognitive awareness.

Asterope recognized how her past sexual behavior was self-destructive and how the subtlety of the plant teachers was exactly what she needed to heal.

There is sexual trauma in my history of my own creation. I looked for love, security, and comfort through sexuality, believing that this was the only way to get this. Particularly in my late teens, I acted out sexually a lot and recognized later that this was harmful to my psyche, and that this wasn't even sexual expression. This was lost confusion trying hard to get love and then turning sexually off, because I didn't know how to do it in a healthy way....There were people who just wanted me to reiterate the story which was not useful. I could tell the story again and again but it wasn't helpful in any way..... What was helpful for me was to calm the mind and connect with the plant's subtlety.

Taygeta stated how dieting plants supported her mental clarity. "I felt a deeper sense of peace and oneness with the whole world. I tend to

be a worrier and in my mind a lot and it seemed that the diet cleaned out my mind so there was more space.”

Maia described how her perception of her reality transformed after she dieted ajo sachá.

Before the diet I saw everything through multiple layers of sickness. I couldn't tell what was reality, what was insecurity, what was my sickness or what was someone else's. You're looking at something through fifteen different lenses and you don't know what's reality even though your intention is to be clear, but you don't know what's clouding what. And post-diet it's so much clearer. You know what's yours and what's someone else, and you know how to clean it off. You're not looking at past, present, or future. You're only looking at the present. There's a huge difference. When you're reacting it's only in the present moment. When your reaction is disproportionate you're dealing with all kinds of cloudy issues. There's a huge difference in how you walk in the world. You're not walking as a damaged 1-year-old, 2-year-old, 6-year-old, or teenager.

Maia explained how increased awareness of energy exchange during sexual activity greatly influenced her perception of sexual intimacy.

Before I started dieting I had more partners than I want to mention. There was a ridiculous amount of lack of discretion in sexual partners: men, women, married, unmarried, someone I knew, someone I didn't know. It didn't matter because it was impulsive and the language of seeking. I was seeking but in the wrong direction. I think my sexuality before was evidence of how deep my sickness was but also evidence of my desire to be healthy. I don't think I'll ever be able to be in a sexual relationship with anyone in a carefree way. I'm so much more aware of what it actually means to exchange energy. I won't want to expose myself to someone's energy if they're not clean. There are only a few times that I'm clean enough to expose my energy to someone else. I've abused sexual energy so much and for so long that I'm totally not interested until I know I'm going to be totally clean with it.

Celaeno recognized the importance of interpreting a challenging ceremony as a beneficial experience instead of focusing on the abuse from her father.

When I closed with ajo sachá I remember the moon beaming on me and I got the message that although I went through a tough time, I got through it. It was strengthening for me and I felt gratitude that I got so much more from my father than hurt. I'm grateful for what I've been able to endure and in Peru I got the message that it was all about training. It was a cost benefit analysis. I needed strengthening for what was yet to come.

Electra described how self-confidence relaxed her need for information in the present and how she could acquire knowledge during dream-time.

I used to need to know everything and now I don't have the time to think about everything. If I don't need the information right now, I know I can get it later. It's also a confidence thing, knowing that I can get the information if I need it. A detachment of not having to have everything right now is a liberation that leads to an erotic liberation.

My work in dreams are not just sleepy-time dreams but during my first diet in the latter six months I would drink and go to bed and have a two-hour session where downloads would come through. It was like dreams but not. All of my dreams since working with the plants have shifted.

Connecting with subtle energies.

Coresearchers experienced interactions with subtle energies that encompassed sexual unions with plant spirits during ayahuasca ceremonies, sexual fantasies and unions with non-physical beings during plant diets, and plant spirit marriages.

I've had encounters where spirits have come through and [I was] feeling an erotic charge with these spirits. Sometimes it's positive and sometimes it's negative, and based on the dynamics of these interactions I'll guard myself from it if it's expressed in a negative sense or be open to it if it's in a positive sense. There's also no question that sometimes the connection you have with some energy gets opened up, which can be a beautiful experience. It's a combination of intuition and vibration, and the whole constellation of different hits that help me to discern if it's positive or negative. (Asterope)

I was very sexual with animals during dreams. Two profound experiences with a bear and a wolf occurred during my first year diet. The bear was half bear and half human and was very gentle and healing....When I was being sexual with the animals in dream-time it felt very safe and liberating. It opened up an area of my heart that was closed before. (Taygeta)

Alcyone and Merope recognized the challenges of energy

transference with other plant drinkers and subtle energies.

Earlier on I would transfer that energy to whomever I was sitting beside which was dangerous. It got me into a dangerous place because I was taking his energy and he was receiving my energy....For the last many years there has been an edge of sexual energy. It's really hard when it's a vegetalista working with me and there's energy of pure love. It has been really hard not letting it become a sexually charged experience.

I learned when spirits were trying to seduce me and that it was a huge red flag that something is trying to get in. That's the doorway. I feel different, a dark energy trying to get in during dreamtime or visions that come in the form of a man seducing me. I had experiences where a man would touch me and I froze and couldn't get him off of me. I lost all my power. (Alcyone)

I was being completely overtaken by an energy that did not feel like it was mine. It came from the outside and wanted me to express. It was crazy. I had not been sexual because I thought my second chakra was shut down and this came out of nowhere. I was pretty sure that something was messing with me and I had a vision of it when I was in Peru. It didn't feel like it came from my life and it didn't feel like me. It felt great but it didn't feel like me. I was dieting ayahuasca and it was like no other experience I've ever had.

I would go for periods of two-three nights in a row around my moon time when my sexual drive became most heightened. Unknown men would show up in my dreams and I think only once I engaged in sex. There may have been two men at the same time and it was great. But usually because I was on the diet I would say no or when the situation would get close I would say "No, it doesn't feel right." And if a female energy showed up it usually showed up as me—not another woman so I realized it was me wanting me. (Merope)

Maia explained how her relationship with the plant she dieted for six months, ajo sachá, was like a marriage that encompassed every aspect of her life experience and was a symbiotic relationship.

When I dieted ajo sachá he introduced himself to me and told me that we were going to be lovers and that our worlds were going to be interconnected from everything mundane as doing the dishes to things as complicated as spirit traveling and my healing work. In a conversation with the ajo sachá plant spirit there was trust developing and saying that we would be interwoven and walking together. I asked the spirit “What’s in it for you? Why would you clean me out?” The answer was, “The human body is the most incredible playground ever and if you can maintain an environment without salt or sugar so that I can stay in your body, it’s the most fun playground of all—to see things from a human perspective—in a human body—to be able to move in a way that I’ve never been able to move before.” In that I understood what he meant by being a lover and the idea of a plant entering the human kingdom and a human entering the plant kingdom. It’s just as foreign to both of us and a mutually beneficial thing which is kind of erotic in it’s own way.

During the process of purification Maia and Celaeno talked about the dark visions with subtle energies that occurred during ayahuasca ceremonies.

Ajo sachá is to clear up baggage and in a ceremony I was shown what I was going to be cleaning up. Some of those visions were extremely disturbing and erotic as well of vampires, sex slaves, images of abuse of power, men and women chained to stone walls in dungeons where they were sex slaves born in this role and they found ways to enjoy the role and play with this power. (Maia)

Then there was my sister and that something happened to her. Something about the Vatican and that somehow I was involved in a sexual way with my brother who is two years older than me. This was frightening but I don’t have any evidence. On two occasions now the shaman said that he saw me in a prison and rats running around. My pants were coming off me and it was enormously phallic and sexual, pornographic stuff that couldn’t be mine. He said that it had to be the work I’m doing and I’m picking up stuff. (Celaeno)

For Celaeno the quality of her fantasies was an indicator of her healing process as they changed from fantasies about aggression to fantasies about vital energy.

What's happened is that my sexual fantasies have not been about people but energy like communing with an entity that I can't see or like being on the ground and making love to something I can't see. This has happened in the last six months and I can only attribute this to the plants I've dieted. I'll try to evoke the image of a human body but it doesn't work. So it's really me summoning energy. Before my fantasies were very aggressive and now they're not. Now it is truly a union with something else. Because my fantasies have transformed I feel there's evidence that I'm healing. I'm grateful for what I'm able to feel in my body.

Electra described how her erotic connection with nature early in her life was rekindled by drinking plant teachers.

For me it goes back to sensual fantasies when I was a teenager of having sex with trees, and then I set that aside and it didn't come back until working with ayahuasca and plants. It's not like sex of how we normally think about sex. It's like plants growing out of my uterus and giving birth from my belly button.

Connecting with God.

Several coresearchers shared their realization of how intimately connected they were to God. From this insight coresearchers were able to have some understanding of life force as sexual energy and enhance their own communication with God.

"I realized that we are all one. Separation was an illusion and that in reality we're all connected. We're all unified and we have a deep connection with our totem animals and everyone." (Taygeta)

I've been sitting with how sexual energy and life force energy are the same, and how I can hold the energy as a life force and not take it to a sexual level. I was exploring the whole room, which felt like it was pulsating, not getting distracting but keeping it as a life

force, pure radiance where my body would get hot. It was a lot of heat. (Alcyone)

The diets have helped me get clear communication between me and my soul. First by cleaning off the crap that wasn't serving me. I think that intuition is the dialogue between my earthly self and my soul....There's a dialogue that happens between my higher self and my humanness. My soul is connected to the Creator or Great Spirit or God so that's the umbilical cord between my humanness and God. There is an actual dialogue that sometimes is in symbols, language and dreams.

I became stronger because that's the connection to being well. What the diet is doing is clearing out space and putting in God, however you define it. So spiritually it became a much richer life because there's more space for God. Ultimately my goal in life is to be more connected with Spirit. All of these feelings of sickness are feelings of home-sickness for God. (Maia)

Additional Themes

Once the nine core themes were analyzed, four additional themes emerging from the interviews with the seven coresearchers were explored. These themes are not based on the research interview questions, but are vital to the research topic. These themes are plant communication, plant diets, misuse of power, and women's power.

Plant communication and healing.

The coresearchers shared their insights about the communication and healing power of plant teachers. The key aspects highlighted were plants' subtle communication, unconditional love for humans, sensuality, and healing ability through recalibration.

One of the deepest wounds I have is in the area of sexuality. This is the place where I can go deeply to explore my wounds, and the plants help take me to that place. They sit with me and witness me in that state. They hold that space for me to explore and there's no judgment.

The way plants communicate is so subtle and demands subtlety. You can't be hard and try to communicate with something that is whispering so gently—otherwise you can't hear them. You have to learn a different way to hear. If I want to hear the plants I need to be soft and be relaxed. The plants have taught me a quality of listening and a quality of softening that has relaxed the rigidity in me. The plants are so quiet, subtle, and delicate.

When I think of the connection with the plants I think of it primarily as a spiritual space, and that's what spiritual connection is all about. So there's the aspect of connecting with plant spirits which is a spiritual practice. (Asterope)

Plant medicines are special because many are very feminine and motherly, so it feels good for women. Herbs have been used for a long time and many plants are used for reproductive organs. The plants are very subtle and I find it easier to integrate especially if there's deep trauma. It's not shocking but instead gentle. The greatest strength is gentleness. (Taygeta)

When it's quiet I hear ajo sachá as a vibration all the time. When I'm in Peru and I'm really clear and it's quiet I hear her all the time. When I was down there it was almost too much. After ceremonies when it was quiet she comes through and works with me in the form of vibration.

The plants are so beautiful and so sensual, the most beautiful spirits beings I can ever imagine. They are so generous and can also take energy away if we don't honor them, pure beauty. (Alcyone)

I don't understand how plants work so intensely and so quickly but I know they work on a cellular level. They reprogram the nervous system and take away the channels that were made as we grew up in trauma, and rebuild them into something healthier. Plants push the reset button and we can start over without losing the wisdom that you've collected through your life and through your mistakes. You can clear the nervous system and take away the cellular memory of trauma, and put healthy fluid back in without losing the wisdom. I truly think that is what's happening.

It's curious that some plants have sexual personalities and like to enter people's bodies because it's a sexual playground. The plants can be male or female and some are sexually feminine or sexually masculine. Plants have sexual energy and I learned that sexual energy is more than the physical act of mating. Lust or strong sexual energies hold the potential for tantra because it's so potent. They're the doorway into a higher coupling and an energetic mating because there are so many different dimensions in the plant

world. If the plant world is also interested in sexuality, it makes you wonder how many dimensions sexuality actually covers. It's not just reproduction but there's a deep drive to share energy with other entities and we've just confused it with the act of mating. I don't understand it but it's curious. (Maia)

The plants have their own world and universe. Part of the world of a plant is the erotic nature of the plant. It's the plant manifesting in a way that I can understand as a human being. In my experience most plants come in a masculine and feminine sense together although sometimes it's more masculine than feminine or more feminine than masculine. One plant came to me in the feminine form as an incredibly sensual lotus flower and the other half in the masculine form as guards that received signals from the universe.

Boahuasca doesn't come to me in a mental image but there's a powerful force that is erotic. For me all of the plants have a sensuous quality. I feel very connected to inter-galactic energies that come through, even the air. For example I'll have a feeling of the breath of the jungle that is sensuous. There's something very ripe like a steamy quality or in one ceremony it seemed like all of us had done MDMA. There was such a love vibe going on. There's something about ayahuasca that takes this form when I wondered if it was ayahuasca or ecstasy.

Psychoanalysis and talk therapy are in the realm of consensus reality in a way of being self-aware. Self-awareness disappears with the plants. Therapy is what happened in the past—how are you feeling now and how are you going to handle the future—as opposed to being completely immersed in an experience where the analytical and judgmental mind is gone. For me, plant ceremonies consistently present an opportunity for a non-linguistic experience and when you're dialed in, the processing is beyond words. There is a reworking and re-wiring going on. The plants are jump-starting our systems on many levels, not just a physical level. They are saying “OK, I have information for how you can operate optimally.”

I think the plants are embodiments, healing energies, and carriers of forces that are helping us and helping themselves. They get to proliferate and hold our attention to ensure their own survival. They're looking for availability to proliferate and there are all these people dieting and getting ready to receive these plants. What a great opportunity. I think the plants are aware of that and they make it happen. How many times are people grateful for the plants and say the plants spoke to them? I think plants really are seizing these opportunities to communicate with us. (Electra)

Plant diets.

I was grateful to learn about the coresearchers' views on how Amazonian plant teachers communicate and heal as way as well as how the vegetalismo practice of dieting plants facilitates this process. The coresearchers emphasized the importance of creating dedicated space to diet so they can listen to the plants, purification, and attention to their senses.

The diet is individual and personal. Everyone has their own issues to work on. I believe the diet has certain requirements that need to be followed. It's key to be isolated and follow the food restrictions and not to be hard on oneself. No matter how long the diet is there are benefits. (Merope)

Ayahuasca opens the door and shows the ayahuasero where you're sick and what's top priority. The diet plant is chosen and you learn how to live without the burden of sickness. Then you go back and do it again and clear layers of sickness, and you get lighter and lighter. You have to do it slowly and carefully. You get a new start and each plant diet cleans out one channel of sickness.

I'm aware of how sick I am and how sick most of us are as humans. It makes me humble and brings me to my knees and I pray to the plants for help. I show gratitude when I'm talking to my plant every night during a diet. What I think happens is that the plants show us first what it's like to be healthy, and next what it's like to be powerful. (Maia)

I think the dietary process really gives rise to cleaning that which is interfering with our vital energy. The idea is that you intentionally create an iron deficiency so you're not in your body as much and the longer you can stay in that state the better. You're really not bound by gravity or by the world, so the vital force that exists before manifestation in physical form is released. So it's like the erotic energy shows up in diets and ceremonies. (Electra)

Abuse of power.

The shadow side of vegetalismo includes incidents of ayahuasceros misusing their power and sexually assaulting women inside

and outside of ayahuasca ceremonies. This is rarely discussed openly within vegetalismo communities or in the academic literature. Two coresearchers shared strong opinions about this phenomenon and advocate for women's safety.

Maia spoke about a very challenging situation during her second diet when she became aware of the shadow side of vegetalismo. When Maia found out that the vegetalista who was supervising her diet was having sexual relations with his female patient she immediately stopped her diet.

Shamans, even extremely potent and powerful healers, are human and have their own illnesses and sometimes do things out of their own state of illness. Earlier on I put the shaman I was working with in the position of a guru where I completely surrendered and I was mistaken in doing that. When I heard about his indiscretions I was reactive and pulled away from the tradition altogether, and quit my diet early because I didn't want to be connected with a tradition that was not respectful to women. He may be healthy at some point, but I won't be part of the sickness and that's where the intuition comes in, because if it doesn't feel right then I won't be a part of it....In my opinion he abused his position of power and trust that the female patient had for him by engaging with her sexually. No matter how balanced and strong these women may be in their life, they are going to him for help and they are not appropriate sexual partners even if it's consensual. If they consent I believe it's coming from a place of sickness because they are going to him for help.

Maia commented on the absence of accountability within the practice of vegetalismo, a practice that is rooted in various cultural traditions of South America.

With the healing comes power and if you're not accountable to God then all you are is powerful. Ultimately it's still our choice how we walk in the world. Just because someone has cleaned out their past trauma with the diet it doesn't mean a new level of sickness can't take over that is power-induced. Ayahuasca and other plant

teachers are the fast track to healing. With power comes responsibility and that's where accountability comes in. The more power you get the more humble you need to be. The scariest part is that there is no one this shaman is accountable to because he has reached a point where he's so strong in his power. I don't know where his accountability is and that is when it gets scary. I need to find a system where a group of shamans keep each other in balance. It's sad and a shame that women have to be so careful about where we go to get our healing. We can be wounded in the same area that we need healing. It's such a shame. That's the biggest struggle I'm working with right now. To not turn my back on the medicine way and know that the medicine has its own life and there are times of sickness and times of healing. I'm waiting for another person to open that diet and manage the diet. It's a shame that I feel I have to find a female ayahascero in order to stay safe but that's the position I'm in. I need to find a female practitioner to know that I don't always have to be on guard and know that I'm going to be safe in a ceremony or diet. Or to potentially find a couple where a male and female keep each other in balance.

Electra was very clear about power dynamics and the ethics of ensuring the safety of ayahuasca drinkers in ceremony.

I think that shaman facilitators who abuse their power sexually during ceremonies are taking vital energy from women. I don't think it—I know it because I've seen it. In many ways that's the worst transgression. When you're dieting and doing your work you don't need to take anything from anyone, but if you're not doing your work and slipping and you have all these people coming to you who are really clear with lots of vital energy. It's like a kid in a candy store for a practitioner who knows what they're doing. And you have someone coming to you that is enthralled and they mistake the medicine for the person pouring the medicine. There are a disproportionate number of women going to ceremonies who have a history of sexual trauma, and how interesting that they are the ones practitioners tend to take advantage of. And then there may be women who actually like it, thinking they're special because the shaman is paying attention to them. When you're in a position of power there really is no such thing as consent when there are psychotropics involved.

Electra pointed out the importance that both male and female vegetalistas work with clear integrity to enhance the healing experienced for all parties involved.

The perception that working with plants is male dominated is just a perception because I feel it is not true. If women want to come together to work on projects that's great as long as it doesn't come at the expense of males. It's important to be careful. I'm not anti-male at all, but there are women who are because they haven't healed. It's about how many women heal their wounds, so the message is clear that it's loving ourselves and not rejecting males. It's important to take the message to men. If a woman is able to completely trust a man in ceremony the potential for healing is huge. What better affirmation is there to experience healing with a man who works in integrity and there's a good outcome? Each case is different and each person needs to choose who best to work with. My hope is that not only are women educated but that men are also educated to teach them the skills and tools by which not to engage in transgressions that they're not even aware of, like flip sexual comments. I can see how a male participant could be enchanted by a female practitioner. We can't say that because we're women we're above all of it. We have to be really vigilant in our work and not to take credit for the healing work.

Women's power.

Coresearchers spoke about the strength of women's power including how women are in relationship with men, families, and communities.

Something really important for people to know is how powerful they are. A power that can be used in many ways or can be given away. There is definitely a power play that goes on with sexuality, of really knowing what is true and trusting our discernment. (Alcyone)

Whatever sickness is in front of you is the doorway to what is needed. Women have been abused and misused for centuries and now we're in a time when women are finding their power. It may not be pretty as women learn how to say "no" and not be connected to victimhood which is the same with all oppressed groups in society. As people find their power they find their intuition and don't allow the victimization to begin. As women become stronger, it's only

natural that the oppressor-type role of some of the men would become stronger to keep women in the oppressed position. So they're going to up the ante as women become more powerful until it all balances out. It's all part of the process.

Women are healing as a whole and it's threatening to men. Women have to go more slowly and methodically because they have their tribe, children, and parents and whoever they're caregiving for. It's slower but it's stronger because it's in community. There's safety in groups. (Maia)

If we are empowered sexually, spiritually, mystically, emotionally, and intellectually we have the means to not only protect ourselves and safeguard ourselves from acts of violence, but actually be empowered in power. Until we embrace the feminine principle we'll be entrapped in the cycle of violence. We actually get to develop ourselves as human beings and bring back to life the many parts that have been suppressed by male dominance. It's not power over, it's being empowered – in power. (Electra)

The Composite Depiction

I focused on discovering the recurring essential themes that emerged from the coresearchers as a whole and then created the composite depiction. The composite depiction is a summary of all the qualities, themes and essential features of the group of coresearchers. The composite depiction of how erotic experiences with Amazonian plant teachers can enhance women's quality of sexual/spiritual lives emerged from my immersion into the phenomenon as described by the coresearchers. The essential qualities that characterize the experience of the whole group of researchers were highlighted. Moustakas (1990) describes the composite depiction:

The composite depiction of an experience is developed through a process of immersion into, study of, and concentration on the experience of the phenomenon as presented by each coresearcher. At some point in this process the qualities, core themes, and essences that permeate the experience of the entire

group of coresearchers are understood and a universal depiction is constructed. (p. 68)

The following is the composite depiction of the coresearchers' experience:

I had an ovarian cyst when I was young and then another one, when I received information during a ceremony that there was something growing on my ovary, which was confirmed by an ultrasound. Surgery was recommended, but I thought that even though I could have surgery to take out a body part there would still be something growing. The doctor suggested a hysterectomy and instead I decided that I needed to work with plants. Boahuasca was calling me....Three months after dieting boahuasca I had an ultrasound that showed the cyst was decreasing and ultimately the cyst was no longer there.

I don't understand how plants work so intensely and so quickly but I know they work on a cellular level. They reprogram the nervous system and take away the channels that were made as we grew up in trauma and rebuild them into something healthier. Plants push the reset button and we can start over without losing the wisdom that you've collected through your life and through your mistakes. You can clear the nervous system and take away the cellular memory of trauma and put healthy fluid back in without losing the wisdom.

There were the times I was molested, abused and raped when I was younger and the generational sickness around sexuality that I carry, that my family carries. So the diet cleared this up and [helped me] to know what's clean sexuality and what's a misuse of power sexuality. There was an identity I had created around being sick with my sexuality that I wasn't ready to let go of yet. There was some victimization that I was hanging onto. Once I processed the shame of being the perpetrator and saw what I was capable of doing, I had compassion for both sides. After recovering from what I saw in terms of how sick we can be as humans and I was willing to accept the whole picture, the healing happened pretty quickly.

One of the deepest wounds I have is in the area of sexuality. This is the place where I can go deeply to explore my wounds and the plants help take me to that place. They sit with me and witness me in that state. They hold that space for me to explore and there's no judgment.

I'm gravitating towards a gentler way—a feminine way. I've been living in a masculine way for so long and the plants are guiding me to a safe, caring, and gentler way. What plants have done for me is tap me into the Divine feminine—motherhood, womanhood, and daughterhood—and to be able to tap into this and help other people tap into it. Getting into those deep internal

resonances that women have with what it means to be a woman, whether their connection is guarded, defensive, beautiful, or harmonious, has made me a lot stronger being a woman.

When I do engage again sexually I want it to be a more spiritual union than a pulling needy situation. I'm way more interested in quality, so that's one of the reasons I haven't been seeking it or why it hasn't shown up. As much as I enjoy sex, it doesn't matter if it happens again. I can't predict every situation. I want to know which decision will leave me the most empowered and leave me with the least regret. It's not about being in the moment, as fun as it is. It's about the implications down the road, not wanting to cause harm to another person, and being as clear as possible about where I'm at.

Before the diet I saw everything through multiple layers of sickness. I couldn't tell what was reality, what was insecurity, what was my sickness, or what was someone else's. You're looking at something through 15 different lenses and you don't know what's reality even though your intention is to be clear—but you don't know what's clouding what. And post-diet it's so much clearer. You know what's yours and what's someone else and you know how to clean it off. You're not looking at past, present, or future. You're only looking at the present. There's a huge difference. When you're reacting it's only in the present moment. When your reaction is disproportionate you're dealing with all kinds of cloudy issues. There's a huge difference in how you walk in the world. You're not walking as a damaged 1-year-old, 2-year-old, 6-year-old, or teenager.

When I dieted ajo sachá, he introduced himself to me and told me that we were going to be lovers and that our worlds were going to be interconnected from everything mundane as doing the dishes to things as complicated as spirit traveling and my healing work. In that conversation with the ajo plant spirit there was trust developing and saying that we would be interwoven and walking together. I asked the spirit, "What's in it for you? Why would you clean me out?" The answer was, "The human body is the most incredible playground ever and if you can maintain an environment (i.e., no salt, no sugar) so that I can stay in your body, it's the best playground of all—to see things from a human perspective—in a human body—to be able to move in a way that I've never been able to move before." In that I understood what he meant by being a lover and the idea of a plant entering the human kingdom and a human entering the plant kingdom. It's just as foreign to both of us and a mutually beneficial thing which is kind of erotic in its own way.

The diet taught me discipline, out of sheer survival—how to call for help. Through making the decision daily to stay on the diet it

reinforced my decision to heal and be well. It helped me through all the parts that led me to believe that I deserved to be well. I became stronger because that's the connection to being well however you define well. What the diet is doing is clearing out space and putting in God, however you define it. So spiritually I had a much richer life because there was more space for God. Ultimately my goal in life is to be more connected with Spirit. All of these feelings of sickness are feelings of home-sickness for God.

Plant medicines are special because many are very feminine and motherly, so it feels good for women. Herbs have been used for a long time and many plants are used for reproductive organs. The plants are very subtle and I find it easier to integrate especially if there's deep trauma. It's not shocking but instead gentle. The greatest strength is gentleness. It's curious that some plants have sexual personalities and like to enter people's bodies because it's a sexual playground. The plants can be male or female and some are sexually feminine or sexually masculine. Plants have sexual energy and I learned that sexual energy is more than the physical act of mating. Lust or strong sexual energies hold the potential for tantra because it's so potent. They're the doorway into a higher coupling and an energetic mating because there are so many different dimensions in the plant world. If the plant world is also interested in sexuality, it makes you wonder how many dimensions sexuality actually covers. It's not just reproduction but there's a deep drive to share energy with other entities and we've just confused it with the act of mating....I believe when we diet and abstain from sexual thoughts there is a build up of vital sexual energy. So there's an expression of sexuality during ceremony that is erotic and satisfying that doesn't include sexual acts.

The Creative Synthesis

Heuristic researchers express their intuitive insight and tacit

knowledge of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1990) explains this process:

The major concepts that underlie a creative synthesis are the tacit dimension, intuition, and self-searching. The researcher must move beyond any confined or constricted attention to the data itself and permit an inward life on the question to grow, in such a way that a comprehensive expression of the essences of the phenomenon investigated is realized. (p. 32)

As the primary researcher I was inspired to learn Shipibo icaros that were sung in ayahuasca ceremonies. Also, I created two paintings that synthesized eroticism and plant teachers (Appendix E).

Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative heuristic inquiry explored how women subjectively experience eroticism through the ingestion of Amazonian plant teachers. The study was based on interview data collected from seven coresearchers who participated in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets within the Shipibo vegetalista tradition in Peru. The coresearchers were women who lived in North America and ranged in age from 35 to 55. They were considered experienced plant drinkers, meaning that they had participated in at least thirty ayahuasca ceremonies and dieted plants for at least three months. The general research question that guided the study was this: How can Amazonian plant teachers offer women erotic experiences that transform the quality of their sexual/spiritual lives?

This study identified the following nine core themes that captured the coresearchers' experiences:

1. Purification and support for reproductive health
2. Increased sensory awareness
3. Healing sexual abuse trauma
4. Transformation of relationship with self
5. Empowered decision making
6. Enhanced intimacy with others
7. Enhanced cognitive awareness
8. Connecting with subtle energies
9. Connecting with God

All coresearchers shared that their journey with plant teachers encompassed healing on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions. This summary of the research results begins by discussing transformation on the physical level.

Several of the women drank plant teachers with the intention of curing physical reproductive ailments and found that their journey transformed into a spiritual one. The Western medical system had diagnosed three women with ovarian cysts (one of them requiring a hysterectomy) and one woman with infertility. These women reported that they recovered from all of their physical imbalances (confirmed by medical tests) after drinking ayahuasca and other Amazonian plants. The coresearchers stated that they felt physically supported through reproductive phases such as menstruation, fertility, pregnancy, and menopause. One coresearcher shared how dieting plants taught her to be at her edge and thrive in the midst of challenging physical experiences. For instance, she called on the plant spirits for confidence and perseverance during the final labor push as she delivered her baby.

All of the coresearchers emphasized how plant teachers assisted with re-establishing a connection with their bodies. The plant teachers were able to reprogram the nervous system that enabled energy to flow freely throughout the whole body. This recalibration heightened the capacity to receive external information through their five senses. The coresearchers consistently commented that because plant teachers

cleansed their physical bodies and enhanced their sensitivity, they were more inspired to listen to bodily communication. One coresearcher believed that the body demands attention and creates a disease if unacknowledged. They also experienced an expansion of sexual energy that felt different from their previous orgasm-centered pleasure. This is especially significant when they were not able to engage in sexual activity during diets that lasted up to one year. During a diet they raised their vital force through abstaining from all sexual activity that enabled more energy to be circulated and channeled in creative ways.

The coresearchers were deeply grateful that they were able to release blocked energy in their bodies stemming from sexual trauma. The coresearchers had visions in ayahuasca ceremonies of their own experience of sexual abuse as well as scenes of sexual trauma within their ancestral lineage. These disturbing sexual visions involved themselves, family members, strangers, and other-than-human entities. Two of the coresearchers described having similar visions involving sex slaves in dungeons. Some of the coresearchers reported being able to witness the sexual trauma energetically being extracted out of their physical body. One coresearcher heard spirit doctors say that they took out the negative energy of her grandfather who sexually molested her as well as several other children. A key shift in healing sexual trauma for one woman was the ability to accept the archetypes of victim and perpetrator within herself and have compassion for both.

Five of the seven coresearchers reported having a history of sexual abuse trauma and plant teachers were able to heal layers of this trauma. Their healing journey with plants included a release of shame and grief as well as remembering how to trust themselves and others. One coresearcher's story during an ayahuasca ceremony was particularly poignant. She described how she went into solitude believing she was ugly and supposed to feel pain alone. This coresearcher acknowledged her lifelong mistrust of others (especially males) and she had the epiphany that all of her life she had been looking for a mother to trust. This coresearcher described the turning point as feeling "oceanic bliss" within the safe and harmonic circle and spontaneously knowing that she could trust ayahuasca. She went into the fetal position while the universe gave birth to her. Because her sexual trauma was validated for her in ceremony, she was able to recognize how the past gave her strength rather than just emotional disabilities.⁵

The plant teachers helped the coresearchers to see how disempowering decisions lead to a bleeding of their vital energy. Some of the women discovered how their sexual trauma was connected with self-harming behavior, such as a lack of discretion in sexual partners. There was a greater understanding of how in the past they attempted to fill gaps of self-worth with romantic partners who they knew were inappropriate for

⁵ This part of the coresearcher's transcript was not included in the results chapter to honor her preference to keep these sensitive details more private.

them. The coresearchers became more disciplined with their patience and discernment before entering into a sexual relationship. They realized how they were sexual beings regardless if they had sexual relations with other people or not. This awareness empowered them to be less dependent on others' judgment of their worthiness as sexual beings. The unconditional love and subtleness of plant teachers nourished a feeling of wholeness and love for oneself. The coresearchers experienced this as an opportunity to honor their feminine sexual identity and felt greater trust in knowing they embodied the divine; they learned how to respect this gift by being true to themselves. The plant teachers modeled how to connect with deep internal resonances of what it means to be a woman, a mother, a daughter, and a lover.

The findings highlighted that the process of physical and emotional purification as well as cognitive and behavioral realignments were necessary for sexual/spiritual transformation. They mentioned the importance of setting boundaries, protecting their energetic space, and exercising assertiveness and discernment in their relationships. Once the plant teachers purified their bodies, there was a greater determination to protect this cleansed space and to be mindful of how they replenished it. Some coresearchers expressed how they felt an anxious grasping dynamic in past sexual relationships and that the plants taught them how to honestly communicate their needs in present relationships. The

coresearchers stated that an aspect of reconnecting with their power included trusting their intuition and acting from this intelligence.

The quality of the coresearchers' sexual/spiritual lives was interdependent with the quality of all their relationships. They were shown the truth about their relationships in a revelatory way that inspired them to make significant life changes. An empowered way of choosing healthy relationships required embracing a heightened level of responsibility for their lives. Healing familial relationships with mothers, grandmothers, spouses, and children occurred for several of the coresearchers. One coresearcher said she felt unconditional love for her spouse that she was not able to beforehand when she projected many expectations onto him. Another coresearcher said she felt a sincere appreciation for how her work with the plant teachers supported her son's spiritual development. One woman left a physically abusive marriage, another divorced her spouse, and another chose to accept a marriage proposal. One coresearcher strengthened a connection with her spirit allies, honored her passion for healing, and became a spiritual healer.

In the subtle realm, coresearchers experienced erotic unions with other-than-human beings and plant spirit marriages during both ayahausca ceremonies and plant diets. One coresearcher was able to experiment with her sexual fantasies. She realized that the transformation of her aggressive fantasies (i.e., rape) to erotic merges with subtle energies symbolized the progression of her healing. One erotic union was

described as “plants growing out of my uterus and giving birth from my belly button.”

Several coresearchers shared how their commitment to plants created a marriage-like relationship whereby the plant spirit accompanied them throughout all realms of their life. Coresearchers also expressed that challenging energies could come through as sexual beings during waking and dream-time. Therefore, coresearchers learned to be extremely discerning in the attempt to interact with other-than-human beings of the highest energetic vibrations.

On the spiritual dimension, several coresearchers became more aware of their intimate relationship with God. Connecting with plant teachers became a spiritual practice that awakened a sense of the sacred and a discovery of their own spiritual identity. The necessity of devotion, gratitude, and humility was highlighted in order to be able to connect with the plant world and receive the teachings. They experienced a relaxation in surrendering to a greater creative force that reinforced the continual flow of energy within their bodies and energetic fields. When they learned how to listen to the subtlety of plant teachers they had greater communication with their soul as a portal to God.

Implications of Research Results

As we enter into the discussion of the implications of the research results it is important to clarify that this study offers a snapshot of erotic experiences with plant teachers within a particular tradition for a small

sample size of North American women. This was a heuristic study searching for the essence of women's erotic experiences and not a standardized quantitative study proving that plant teachers heal women. Some of the coresearchers integrated other healing modalities into their lives before and after dieting plants. Therefore, this study can only support the possibility that plant teachers were a valuable component of their healing journey and not that plant teachers were the sole cure of their physical ailments. The research question focused on erotic experiences; however, the study found that a purification of physical and emotional imbalances was essential for the women to experience a sensual revitalization of an erotic nature. It was a coincidental discovery that five of the seven coresearchers had a history of sexual trauma. Their accounts of experiencing some form of healing pertaining to this trauma could highlight the intelligence of their bodily intuition that led them to connect with the plant teachers in the first place.

One of the benefits of narrowing the study's focus on the vegetalismo practices of the Shipibo is that all the coresearchers participated in ceremonies and plant diets with the same vegetalista. The plant diets, supervised by this vegetalista, were comprised of ayahuasca ceremonies to open and close the diets and interim monitoring. All plant dieters followed the same strict protocol: the restriction of specific foods and other herbal supplements, such as Chinese herbs, and the elimination of sexual stimulation. Additionally, participating in ceremonies based in

other traditions such as a tipi meeting with the ingestion of peyote was highly discouraged as this might disrupt the diet. The protocol also required that alternate treatment modalities such as massage therapy and acupuncture were kept to a minimum so as to decrease the likelihood of being influenced by the practitioner's energy. Sacred plants such as peyote and diverse healing modalities are valuable in their own right; however, during the plant diet it was essential to give energetic space for the dieter to connect with the plant spirit and for the plant teacher's healing potential to become fully realized.

The majority of the coresearchers were inspired to first begin drinking plant teachers based on curiosity and recommendations from friends and family. The women did not have the expectation that particular physical imbalances would be healed; rather, they hoped their quality of life in general would improve. For a few coresearchers, as they drank more frequently in ayahuasca ceremonies they received particular diagnoses, both by Western medical tests and the vegetalista, and became highly motivated to participate in plant diets for healing. Motivation and belief in the effectiveness of the diets could have positively influenced their perceived success of the diets; however, these factors were not evaluated in the study. All of the coresearchers drank in at least thirty ayahuasca ceremonies and participated in at least one plant diet of three or more months. Five of the seven coresearchers dieted plants for at least one year and four of them had been dieting plants off and on for

more than five years. The women said that dieting was the only way to strengthen a connection with plant spirits and that a diet of six months to a year was required to establish a relationship with a plant spirit. They believed the diet process increased their flow of vital energy that healed multilayered aspects of their lives.

The discussion now explores the study's findings of how plant teachers were highly intelligent healers on the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual level. One significant implication from this study is the capacity for plant teachers to support reproductive health such as regulating menstruation cycles, increasing fertility, healing ovarian cysts, and transitioning through menopause. This finding is in alignment with how the Shipibo use various Amazonian plants for menstruation, infertility, miscarriages, pregnancy, and pain-free labor and deliveries such as "piri piri" (Chuquimbalqui, personal communication, June 1, 2009).⁶ It is important to educate women about the potential healing benefits of plant teachers for reproductive issues such as infertility and ovarian cysts. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to go into further depth about these medical issues; however, I advocate that there are alternate forms of treatment with vegetalismo practices and plant teachers.

The plant teachers offered a non-rational and intuitive experience of

⁶ Different indigenous communities can have diverse beliefs regarding the benefits and dangers of a plant. For instance, in Ecuador, the Shuar believe that ayahuasca gives the developing child power and that it is born stronger, however, the Sharanahua fear that ayahuasca may cause miscarriages (Perkins, 2001).

perceiving the world and an embodied sense of knowing. For the coresearchers plant teachers cultivated mindfulness and transformed their perception of reality through an expansion of consciousness.

Coresearchers experienced a level of surrendering to a process of transformation they had not known was possible. The women emphasized the unconditional love of plants and how they felt safe venturing into areas they needed to heal. Ayahuasca ceremonies were a way to journey into hidden realms of the psyche where ecstatic and traumatic memories were stored. The coresearchers realized that they were accountable for their choices. One coresearcher emphasized that the diet was key in helping her accept responsibility for her life and she learned that a co-creative process with spirit was continually evolving.

This study revealed how Amazonian plant teachers are erotic in nature and all the coresearchers commented how they felt a heightened sensuality after ingesting ayahuasca at least once. This is congruent with Shannon's (2002) statement that ayahuasca drinkers commonly feel sensuous with everything in their environment and the ayahuasca supports people in developing more than purely orgasm-orientated sexual behaviors. Several of the coresearchers envisioned sexual unions with animal and other-than-human spirits during ayahuasca ceremonies and dreamtime. One woman experienced a sexual union with a bear that could be correlated with stories of Amazonian shamans having ritualized sex

with deities manifesting as animals (e.g., jaguars) to gain shamanic powers (Macedo, 2007; Silva, 2004).

Several coresearchers described feeling married to the spirit of the plant they dieted. This finding supports the concept of the “spirit lover” that is commonly described within the literature on shamanism. The spirit lover is an essential helper along the path of being a healer. The Shuar people in Ecuador tell stories of men who obtain power by having sex with *tsunki* women, the shamanically potent underwater people (Perruchon, 2004). The coresearchers speak about their relationship with spirit lovers as all encompassing and more fulfilling than with human partners. It is believed that marriages between shamans and their nonphysical spirit lovers involve intense commitment, passion, and erotic merges and that these relationships may be as intimate, unpredictable, and psychologically fulfilling as any human relationship (Tedlock, 2005).

Plant teachers offer a portal to higher vibrational mating on many different dimensions. The coresearchers spoke of a symbiotic dynamic in which they were able to experience life as the vibration of a plant and the plant was able to experience life within the physical form of a human body. One coresearcher emphasized that plants can heal humans and humans can proliferate the energy of the plants in the material world. Once the perception of sexuality was expanded for the coresearchers to include energetic unions with all of creation the coresearchers were able to have a glimpse of how life force is sexual energy and vice versa. This leads me to

ask the following questions: Do plants teach us how to be in intimate relationships with subtle energies similar to how counselors advise us in our human relationships? How many dimensions does sexuality extend to? How do plant teachers offer a path to traditional tantric practices that involve energetic unions?

The work in vegetalismo with plant teachers involves energetic realignments and openings that inspire transformation on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level. The coresearchers shared how the wisdom of ayahuasca and other plant teachers emphasized the importance of the body as the foundation in becoming spiritually embodied. Plant teachers reminded these women that they are the embodiment of the divine feminine and that their body is a sacred temple. Ingesting plant teachers was an entheogenic-based spiritual practice as a pathway to God. The coresearchers described how their communication with God was strengthened because the plant teachers helped to create more space in their body and mind. This can be described as an embodied spiritual practice that empowers the individual within, as opposed to relying on an external conduit. Soibelman (1995) and Quinlan (2001) research support this viewpoint, finding that participants experienced direct contact with the divine in ayahuasca ceremonies.

Based on my literature review and personal experience I believe that the potential to heal sexual abuse trauma with Amazonian plant teachers is not discussed in the vegetalismo literature or ayahuasca

drinking communities. Several of the coresearchers began dieting plant teachers to address physical imbalances; however, they realized that emotional and spiritual aspects were intimately interwoven with their physical ailments stemming from past sexual trauma. Repressed beliefs were excavated from their subconscious and shifted to conscious awareness during ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets. There was recognition of how sexual trauma caused a disassociation from their body and how after drinking plants they had increased awareness of the multiple forms of bodily communication.

The practice of dieting plants was a key pathway to the coresearchers' feeling safe within their bodies and inspired them to honor this feeling in their intimate relationships. The coresearchers were offered the opportunity to see how their reactions were laced with several levels of sickness attached to sexual trauma. After dieting plants they were able to be more in the present and react from their adult consciousness. Body image, sexual identity, sexual behavior, and sexual perceptions were transformed in a positive way after drinking Amazonian plants. There was also a shift in releasing cultural taboos around sexuality and embracing a fun and loving perception of sexuality and creativity.

In addition to sharing how plant teachers healed sexual trauma the coresearchers also spoke openly about the occurrence of women being re-traumatized after ayahuasca ceremonies. This is in reference to

ayahuasceros misusing their power and sexually assaulting women.⁸

Vegetalismo can be viewed as a path of power and vegetalistas can misuse their power through sexual misconduct. A vegetalista is able to take vital energy from women through sexual transgressions by simply touching their yoni over clothing. The most concerning part is that women may not even know what actually took place if they are in an altered state of consciousness. One coresearcher postulated that ayahuasceros tend to take advantage of women who have a history of sexual trauma. A complimentary factor is that some women may believe they are special and invite and welcome the extra attention from the healer.

It is also important to acknowledge that traumatic memories can surface during a ceremony and in certain instances a woman can project this onto the healer. Regardless, situations can be so complex and mysterious that it is critical that ayahuasceros practice with integrity, beneficence, and non-maleficence. It is strongly believed by the coresearchers (and by me) that consensual sexual activity during an ayahuasca ceremony is impossible between a vegetalista and a plant drinker because there is always an imbalance of power.

Within South America there is rarely a system of accountability for vegetalistas. These healers can hold great power in a community and therefore sexual assaults may not be reported to the authorities. It is also

⁸ There may be situations where men are sexually assaulted by ayahuasceros, however, the coresearchers only commented on their knowledge of women experiencing sexual assaults.

possible that community members immersed in a machismo culture would tend to avoid such matters where certain male behavior is to be expected. While in Peru I heard ayahuasceros say that they did not view sexual activity during ayahuasca ceremonies as an issue of concern and one said that it is actually possible for healing to occur. It could be argued that spiritual seekers must acknowledge that they are not in the position to change the attitudes, values, and beliefs of indigenous South Americans to fit their own cultural ideologies. This poses the question: To what extent must visitors adapt to the local tradition? There is a complexity in the cross-pollination of both the cultural contexts in South and North America and there is no simple answer to this question. The expansive interest in ayahuasca requires a new level of awareness in both North and South American communities that can only be addressed through honest dialogue and diligent education for all parties involved.

The importance of the role of the vegetalista emerged as I reflected on shadow sexuality within vegetalismo. Llamazares (2008) emphasizes that

working upon themselves is a discipline that shamans must maintain throughout their life, as they will not be able to perform their functions as healer of others if they themselves are not in an adequate state of balance in control of their powers. This is, perhaps, the most delicate of shamanic task, especially in the contemporary world, fraught with distractions and temptations that today's shamans usually come across, sometimes with fatal results. (p. 16)

Humility is essential when entering into a shamanic practice which means to understand that we are all on the path together and that as a community we can assist one another to realize our life purpose.

Glass-Coffin (1998) clearly articulates the right relationship by saying that God is the guide for the seeker (or patient) and that human healers are companions on the seeker's path. "Perhaps the greatest danger in this path of knowledge is ego inflation. Humility seems to be essential to any leadership progress" (Luna, 1986, p. 119). The danger is manifested when this ego inflation feeds a healers belief that they are not working on behalf of God and instead act in unethical ways that are in their own best interest. It is important to explore how this harm could be prevented because one harmful act could thwart the healing potential of plant teachers.

The ethical guidelines for all vegetalistas should be to act in the best interest of the patients, prevent harm, and to do no harm to a patient. The perspective between vegetalistas practicing in North America and South America may vary greatly, therefore it would be important to explore possible ethical guidelines that all vegetalistas could adhere to. I commend Forte's clarity when he says that "the adoption and practice of ethical and moral guidelines from the great religious traditions should be used to enhance the effectiveness and utility of the giving and taking of psychedelics in all circumstances" (Forte, 2012, p. 161).

It is my perspective, as a primary researcher, that ayahuasceros misusing their power through sexual assaults is rarely discussed openly within vegetalismo communities or in the academic literature. In conclusion, education about this shadow side of vegetalismo for spiritual seekers going to South America and advocacy for women's safety in ceremony is essential.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study is a small contribution to the valuable research that has been done to date on psycho-spiritual healing with sacred Amazonian plant teachers. It is my hope that the healing potential of plant teachers will continue to be explored further in research studies. Now that this study is complete, it would be reasonable to follow with a study on the erotic experiences of men with Amazonian plant teachers. A comparison study looking for commonalities and differences between males and females could follow. This information could be shared with ayahuasceros to perhaps maximize the healing benefits for North American plant drinkers. A study focusing on plant drinkers indigenous to South America could lead to an illuminating comparison of cultural values, beliefs, and ethics around sexuality and spirituality between North and South America. Additionally, heuristic methodology could be used to study the erotic healing experiences with plant teachers in different traditions such as the Shuar in Ecuador or the Santo Diame in Brazil.

The primary researcher supposes that all the academic studies to date have been on ayahuasca, therefore, a key contribution of this study is that it focused on the vegetalismo practice of plant diets. Further academic research on diets with plant teachers is essential for expanding our knowledge of vegetalismo and the primary researcher believes there are vegetalistas in Peru who would be open to sharing their knowledge. It would also be possible to conduct studies in North America with Amazonian plants that are neither hallucinogenic nor illegal in North America such as tobacco and marosa. Additionally, the scope of research could creatively be extended to investigate local plants in North America, such as sage, mistletoe, and juniper, following the same diet regimen within the vegetalismo tradition.

One specific focus for future studies could be the investigation of how vegetalismo can be a complimentary healing modality in women's sexual and reproductive health. Due to the limited selection of participants it is impossible to generalize that Amazonian plant teachers can cure reproductive diseases. Therefore, a quantitative study focusing on specific physical diagnoses such as ovarian cysts and infertility could be beneficial. It would be also be interesting to study the intrauterine effects on the fetus of women who drink ayahuasca during pregnancy in the

Santo Diame church in North America (where it is legal to use ayahuasca as a sacrament for religious purposes).¹⁰

Another key area for more extensive research is how vegetalismo can be a therapeutic tool for healing sexual trauma. Researchers have studied how ayahuasca treats addiction, depression, and anxiety (Grob & Bravo, 1996; Strassman, 1995). Addiction treatment centers in Peru, such as Takawaski, have had a high success rate of curing problematic substance use (Mabit, 1996, 2007). If ayahuasca can heal addiction stemming from a disconnection to one's self, nature, and spirit, then it is possible that ayahuasca can provide healing for people with sexual abuse trauma.¹¹ Also, it would be beneficial to research the shadow side of shamanism, that is to say, the phenomenon of ayahuasceros misusing their power with plant-drinkers in a sexual manner. This study is not able to generalize that sexual misconduct occurs often in ayahuasca ceremonies. However, based on my personal experience and the reports from coresearchers in this study, this is an ethical and social issue crying for attention and healing.

¹⁰ There has been one formal study on women in the Santo Diame church in Brazil who choose to drink ayahuasca during their pregnancies by Biatriz Labate (2011).

¹¹ Working as a counselor in maternity and addiction, I propose that a high percentage of women with problematic substance use (along with depression and anxiety) are also survivors of sexual trauma.

Reflections of My Personal Journey

The work in vegetalismo involves energetic openings and realignments that inspire transformation on a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level. I believe there are diverse forms of spiritual guidance and that plant teachers are one form that guide plant drinkers to wholeness. The spiritual guidance of plant teachers provides deeper insight into my perception of “self” and offers an experience of the greater “self.” Exploring my emotional life while being cognizant of the stories I attach to these emotions enables me to take responsibility for my life choices. This responsibility includes becoming aware of how I identify with my shadow ego in ceremony and then integrating these shadow aspects to create a harmonic balance between both the light and shadow within my being. Through a spiritual practice with plant teachers I am able to venture to greater depths of self-discovery and is foundation upon which I can transform fear and self-doubt into faith and clarity. The plant tendrils magically guide me through a collection of insights and visions in how to interact wisely and compassionately with the world.

I have been blessed with an array of opportunities to learn about plant teachers both experientially and academically and view my decision to conduct this type of intimate research study as emerging from the belief that nurturing one’s erotic intelligence is a precious endeavor. Being involved in this heuristic research process has motivated me to cultivate greater self-awareness and enabled me to remember that my natural

essence is a vibrant erotic being. Vegetalismo offers me a wider experience of energy that touches my heart and soul and has transformed my life in mysterious ways. Reconnecting to the life source and opening to the divine has given me courage to journey through many symbolic deaths and deepen into spiritual truths. The plant teachers continue to guide me through this transformation and my healing journey resonates with Park's (2000) description of the shamanic path:

Through her initiatory sickness, the mudang [a Korean Buddhist shaman] escapes from the ordinary world by withdrawing into darkness so as to be reborn into a purely creative realm. By surrendering, and thus dying in her own heart, the shaman starts to see streams of light and awakens to possessing God. In "dying," however, the shaman does not wither away, but rather lifts her heart to become undivided and gathered into one with divinity. When her heart is fixed on one point with divinity, she finds that nothing is impossible. The shaman thus taps into the divine world with the intention to work for the benefit of all sentient beings and, as a result, starts to understand the meaning of their lives. (p. 393)

The spiritual practice with Amazonian plant teachers and dream work connects me to my heart, Mother Earth, and Creator and ushers a surrendering to life's unfolding mystery. I experience plant teachers as a manifestation of spirit in the material realm and a gateway into a physical embodiment of spirituality. This gift continues to support my sincere commitment to genuine transformation during this marvelous time in our planetary evolution. I am eternally grateful.

My intention is to continue to cultivate meaning with vegetalismo as a guide for how to live in integrity for those to whom I am in service. I desire that those who are awakening to their sexual liberation are able to

access this dissertation. This research process inspired me to create Erotic Intelligence workshops where women can share their sacred sexual/ spiritual stories. I would also like to reach both academics and health care professionals including counselors, physicians, midwives, and educators. One of my next steps is to create a workshop for health care professionals emphasizing the importance of sacred sexuality in reproductive health care.

Concluding Thoughts

Amazonian plant teachers are the erotic vibrations of creation as a pathway to embodied spiritual wisdom. It is with eloquent mastery and mystery that these plant teachers continue to guide spiritual seekers through an enchanting sexual/spiritual transformation. Through a process of purification, heart opening, and remembrance of how one is connected to the spiritual whole, a person can learn to live with integrity and compassion for both human and other-than-human beings. The spiritual guidance of plant teachers fosters enhanced self-awareness of one's energetic body and provides deeper insight into one's perception of their health and wholeness. An integration of plant wisdom into daily life can support the spiritual aspects of individual and community healing. It is imperative that people contemplate the value of the vegetalismo practices at this particular time in human evolution and to have humble gratitude for the love and spiritual-erotic intelligence of sacred plant teachers.

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Appendix A:

Introductory Letter to Prospective Research Participant

Hello, my name is Yalila Espinoza and I am a doctoral level student in the East and West Psychology Program at California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, California. I am conducting a pilot study on the erotic nature of Amazonian plant teachers. The study is to explore women's erotic experiences while participating in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets. I am seeking your participation in this study.

The requirements to participate in this study are that you: are twenty-one years of age or older, have participated in ten or more ayahuasca ceremonies in Peru with a Shipibo healer, have completed at least one plant diet of three-month duration, and are willing to meet for two interviews with me. Your role as coresearcher in this study is to answer the interview questions as honestly as possible. The questions are not meant to invade your privacy and you are free to answer them or not as you see fit. Nevertheless, I am seeking a vivid, accurate and comprehensive portrayal of your experiences.

This research project will use qualitative methodology and involve two interviews. The first interview will last a maximum of two hours and will be audio taped and transcribed. This interview will involve your description and interpretation of your experiences of eroticism in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets. The second interview will last a maximum of one hour and provide you with an opportunity to give feedback to refine your description of eroticism.

Confidentiality is guaranteed within the limits of the law. All data and consent forms, written, audio-taped or transcribed materials, will be kept in a locker to which only I, Yalila Espinoza, the primary researcher, have access. All confidential materials will be coded and identified by numbers only. All identifying information will be deleted when direct quotes are used in the dissertation. Neither your name, nor any other identifying information will be associated with your answers in any private or public report of the results. Your request to omit from the dissertation particular details that you specify to the primary researcher will be honoured. The notes, tapes, transcriptions and any other written data materials will be destroyed after 7 years have elapsed from the completion of this dissertation.

You may choose at any time to withdraw your consent to participate in this study and discontinue your voluntary participation with no penalty. There is no cost to you and no guaranteed benefits for being in this study. You may however, find the process interesting and insightful. The information you provide will benefit the understanding of women's experience of eroticism in the context of ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets.

If you have any concerns or unresolved questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a participant you may contact me via email at [withheld for privacy] or by phone at [withheld for privacy]. You may also contact the dissertation chair for this study, Dr. Jorge Ferrer, by calling [withheld for privacy] to discuss any matters of concern with her. Furthermore, you may directly or anonymously write to The Human Research Review Committee Chair, CIIS, 1453 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or call (415) 575-6432.

I appreciate your interest in participating in this research and value your unique contribution. Thank you for your interest and should you agree to participate, your support in exploring eroticism and Amazonian plants.

Sincerely,

Yalila Espinoza

Appendix B:

Informed Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Yalila Espinoza, Doctoral candidate, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to investigate women's erotic experiences in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets. It is the primary researcher's aim to contribute to our understanding of eroticism and Amazonian plants as a lived experience.

Study Procedures:

Participation involves two interviews in a mutually agreed upon location. The first interview will last a maximum of two hours and will be audio taped and transcribed. This interview will involve your description and interpretation of your erotic experiences in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets. The second interview will last a maximum of one hour and provide you and the researcher with an opportunity to refine the understanding of the topic discussed. No prior preparation is required on your part before the first interview. You will be given an opportunity to review the transcript and check the validity of the researcher's analysis of the data before the second interview. Access to the tapes will be limited to Yalila Espinoza and the transcriber. The transcriber will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

You may experience discomfort as a consequence of the prepared interview questions that may touch emotionally sensitive issues, therefore, you can refuse to answer any research questions. There are no benefits, either monetary or resulting from the experience itself, offered or guaranteed associated with your participation. However, you may find the process interesting and thought provoking and the information you provide will benefit the understanding of eroticism in ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets. Negative side effects are not expected, however, if you experience distress from participating in the study Yalila Espinoza will be available before, during, and after the interviewing process to talk about your concerns and/or facilitate referrals to supervisors, consultants, or therapists if needed. You can end your participation in the study at any time without risk or penalty.

Confidentiality:

Confidentiality is guaranteed within the limits of the law (see attached confidentiality statement). All confidential materials will be coded and identified by numbers only and all identifying information will be deleted when direct quotes are used in the dissertation. Neither your name, nor any other identifying information will be associated with your answers in

any private or public report of the results. Your request to omit particular details from the dissertation that you specify to the primary researcher will be honored. Interview numbers will be used instead of names on all project records, tape recordings, transcripts and in any discussion of data. Data that will be kept on a computer hard disk will also be identified only by pseudonyms and will be password protected so that only the researcher has access to it. All data and consent forms, written, audiotape or transcribed materials will be kept in a locker to which only Yalila Espinoza has access. The notes, tapes, transcriptions, and any other written data materials will be destroyed within five years of collection.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, your rights as a participant, or if you feel that you have been placed at risk, you may report your concerns to the Human Research Review Committee Chair, Jorge Ferrer, CIIS, 1453 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or call [withheld for privacy].

Consent:

I, _____, consent to participate in this study of erotic experiences in the context of ayahuasca ceremonies and plant diets, conducted by Yalila Espinoza of the California Institute of Integral Studies. I understand the purpose and nature of this study and am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the tape-recorded interview data to be used in the process of completing a Ph.D. degree, including a dissertation and any other future publications resulting from this dissertation. I understand that my name and other identifying information will not be used. I have received a copy of this consent form and I understand that my confidentiality will be protected within the limits of the law.

Participant Signature

Date

If you would like to receive a written summary of the results of this study, please provide an address where it can be sent to you upon completion.

Address: _____

Appendix C:

Research Participant Bill of Rights

As a participant in psychological research, you have the right to:

1. be treated with dignity and respect;
2. be given a clear description of the purpose of the study and what is expected of you as a participant;
3. be told of any benefits or risks to you that can be expected from participating in the study;
4. know the researcher's training and experience;
5. ask any questions you may have about the study;
6. decide to participate or not without any pressure from the researcher;
7. have your privacy protected within the limits of the law;
8. refuse to answer any research question, refuse to participate in any part of the study, or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative effects to you;
9. be given a description of the overall results of the study upon request, and
10. discuss any concerns or file a complaint about the study with the Human Research Committee, California Institute of Integral Studies, 1453 Mission St., San Francisco, CA, 94103.

Appendix D:

General Interview Guideline Questions

1. Describe an erotic experience you have had in an ayahuasca ceremony or during a plant diet.
 - a. Describe a non-sexual union with a physical being in the material realm.
 - b. Describe a sexual/non-sexual union with a nonphysical being in the subtle realm.
2. Recount, if any, erotic experiences in dreamtime during a plant diet.
3. Describe, if any, your intentions of healing a sexual or reproductive issue in an ayahuasca ceremony or a plant diet?
 - a. Describe the issue with regard to its physical aspects.
 - b. Describe the issue with regard to its emotional aspects.
 - c. Describe the issue with regard to its spiritual aspects.
4. In what ways, if any, has an erotic experience changed your life?
 - a. Describe the change on a physical level.
 - b. Describe the change on an emotional level.
 - c. Describe the change on a mental/behavioral level.
 - d. Describe the change on a spiritual level.
5. Describe, if any, an erotic experience that was challenging in an ayahuasca ceremony or plant diet?
6. What have Amazonian plants taught you about eroticism?

Appendix E:
Creative Synthesis

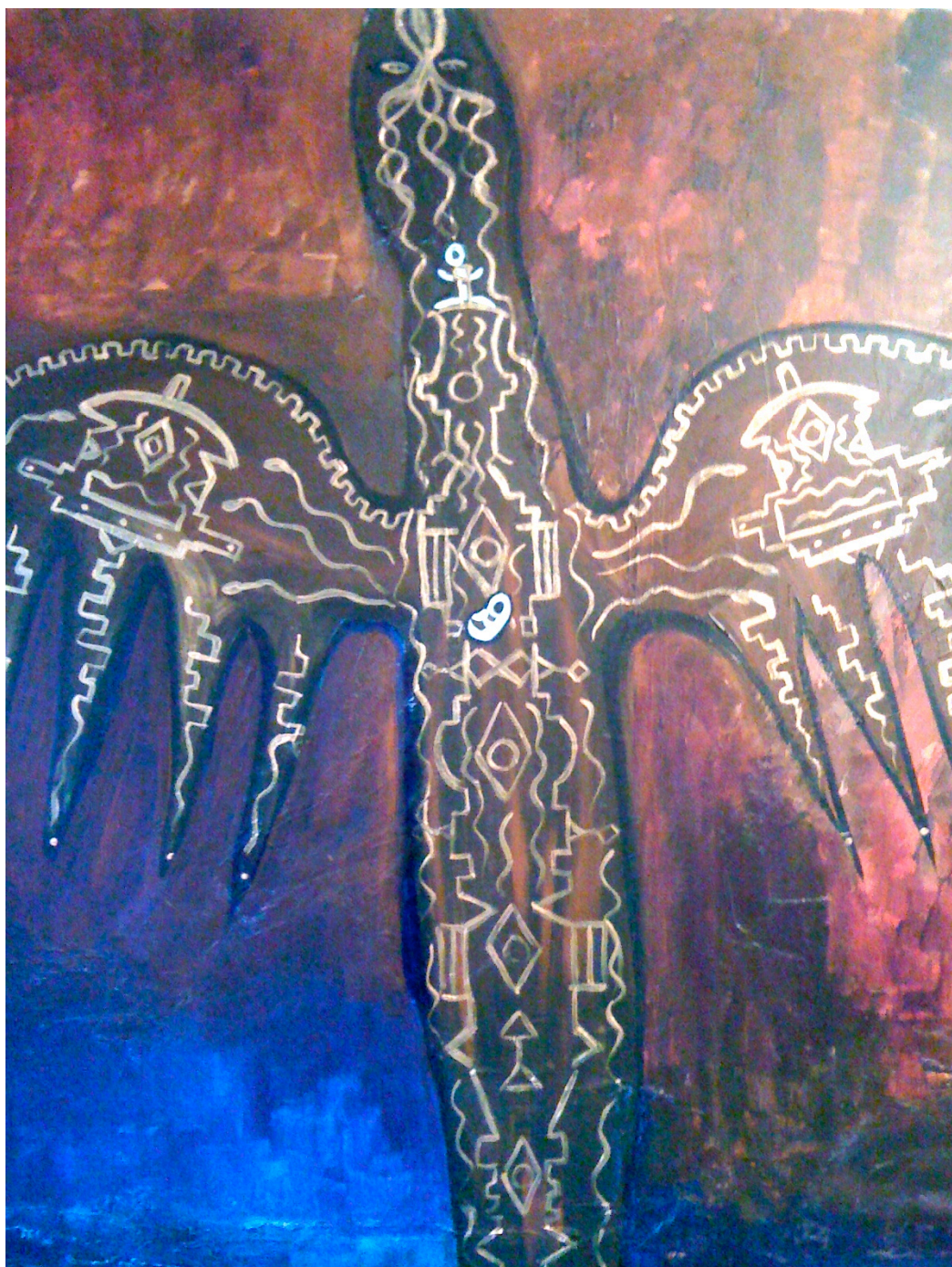


Figure E1. Photography of Creative Synthesis No. 1, (2012), by Yalila Espinoza. Author's photo.

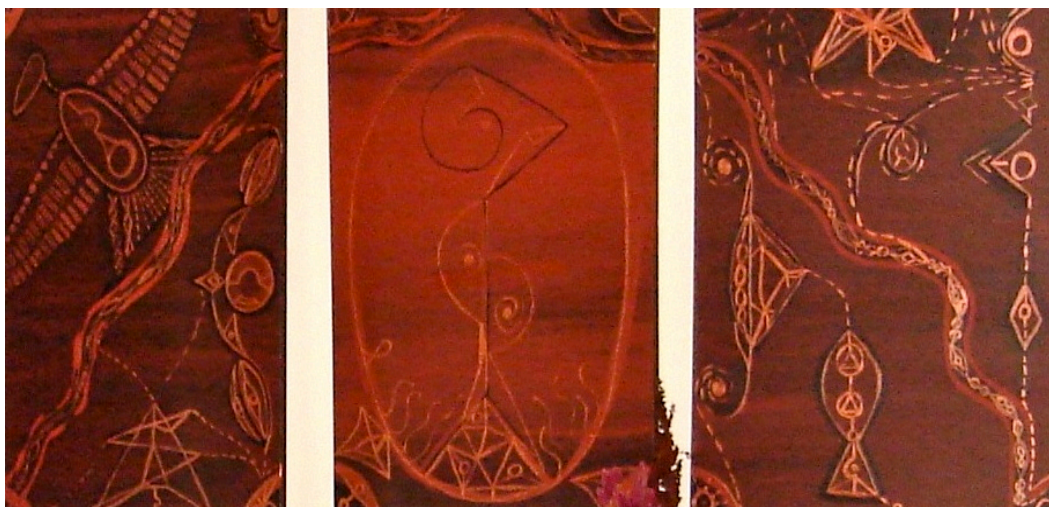


Figure E2. Photography of Creative Synthesis No. 2, (2012), by Yalila Espinoza. Author's photo.