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**Dismantling the Myth of “Mother Ayahuasca”:
Gender Dynamics and Cosmology within Mestizo Ayahuasca Shamanism,
Iquitos, Peru.**

By Emily Sinclair

submitted to the Graduate School of Anthropology for Durham University in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

2024

Abstract

This dissertation examines the impact that non-local ayahuasca participants have had on mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos, Peru, with a focus on gender dynamics and cosmology. My thesis, based on 24 months of anthropological fieldwork between 2017 and 2021, argues that the commodified image of “Mother Ayahuasca” as a purely benevolent feminine being has been propagated through the Westernization of ayahuasca shamanism and its commercialisation for Western clientele with an increased emphasis on healing. Yet, as well as *curanderismo* (healing) practices, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism involves *brujería* (sorcery), and furthermore, sometimes sexual seduction and abuse, which I argue are rife across the ayahuasca industry.

Mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the Peruvian Amazon is rapidly transforming through the influx of Western participants and the growth of a global ayahuasca industry during the last 30 to 40 years. Iquitos, Peru, is renowned for being an ayahuasca tourism hub and the epicentre of global ayahuasca use, whereby Western spiritual seekers arrive with what are often romanticised perceptions of Amazonia and ayahuasca. In participating in ayahuasca shamanistic *curaciones* (healing) rituals, Westerners are also participating in local practices that by default include *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) and “love magic”, a usual part of local seduction practices, but also, in some cases, related to occurrences of sexual abuse.

While Western influence and urbanization have increased women’s participation in ayahuasca practices, ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region remains dominated by patriarchal structures. Indeed, Western ayahuasca drinkers seeking alternatives to oppressive patriarchal social and religious systems are often met with or re-create the abuses of patriarchy in this alternative context.

Yet, in contrast to typically Western perceptions of dualities of gender and cosmology being fixed, as represented by the commodified image of “Mother Ayahuasca” associated with “the Divine Feminine”, nature and healing, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism entails shifting dualities of gender and cosmology in a more volatile dynamic relationship. Ayahuasca is capable of manifesting in male or female forms and *curanderismo* and *brujería* are not gendered domains but historically and contemporarily interconnected and in some cases the same practices.

Drawing on Amazonian, feminist, gender, and ecological studies, and positioning itself within the anthropology of the non-human, my ethnography emphasizes the relational aspects of ayahuasca shamanism and the importance of shamanic agency in relation to ayahuasca. It analyses the contradictions between Western conceptions of ayahuasca shamanism and local mestizo beliefs and practices and tracks continual exchanges of understanding between Western apprentices and their *maestros* (teachers). My analysis reveals how hybrid forms of ayahuasca shamanism continue to emerge within the tourism setting and how alternative cosmological perspectives can co-exist in such hybrid spaces.

In the current climate of globalisation involving the ecological and MeToo movements, ayahuasca shamanism serves as a vehicle for the cross-cultural exchange of social, cosmological and medical beliefs and practices, and has brought feminist issues to the fore. However, I argue that the growth of the ayahuasca industry has also exacerbated ‘darker’ elements of ayahuasca shamanism, contributing to occurrences of *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) and sexual abuse. My analysis highlights the presence of shamanic warfare at the core of ayahuasca shamanism, showing how it manifests presently within the ayahuasca industry around individual practitioner’s battles for power, status, money, and, I argue, also women. It also records the emergence of novel interpretations of healing mental health problems within *brujeria* frameworks.

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For my Dad and for *Padre* (in memoriam),
my spiritual guides in life and in death,
and for Aeva,
mi maestrasita curandera.

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Introduction

It was approximately six weeks into my time in the Iquitos region and my initiation into the world of ayahuasca during the summer of 2014 when I was asked to assist with a Canadian woman who was “in *dieta*” at the centre where I had been volunteering. I had recently learned that a shamanic plant *dieta* involves the ingestion of medicinal rainforest plants and dietary and other behavioural restrictions, including sexual abstinence, and limited physical contact, and also that *dietas* are usually conducted in isolation. The woman, an experienced drinker of ayahuasca, had been dieting in a *tambo* (individual wooden lodging) on the centre grounds with the rainforest root, *chiric sanango*, for several days when Don Luco, the local shaman/*ayahuasquero* attached to the centre, approached me in the kitchen where I was working as a cook.

I was already aware that the woman dieting was acting unusually since, during the first days of her 8- day *dieta*, she had left her *tambo* on multiple occasions running out into the jungle. A disagreement between Don Luco and the centre owner had become apparent during this ordeal over the woman’s suitability for the *dieta* she was doing. Don Luco had felt it was too strong for her, but the centre owner had insisted she was ready for it. Each viewed the other as responsible for the problems that had arisen.

This time, she was attempting to leave the centre grounds and make her way to the city. It was at this point Don Luco asked for my help, in part for translation, and in part because, as he explained to me, she needed to bathe (something he explained was critical and she had not been doing) and I would be needed to undress and then redress her. I was able to communicate with her to explain to an extent what was going on. Thankfully, having managed to coax her back to her *tambo* and bathe and redress her, the woman had fallen asleep peacefully and awoke with clarity.

Several days later, following a final ayahuasca ceremony, the centre owner stormed into the *maloca* (ceremonial house) furious to find me speaking with the woman in *dieta* and late for my morning shift in the kitchen. Whilst I was aware

that the rules of *dieta* usually prohibit talking and physical contact with others for *dieteros* (people in *dieta*), the woman had approached me to ask me about what had happened during the previous days – she had experienced significant memory loss but was aware I had been present at certain points. She was especially concerned that she awoke one day wearing trousers that she would never usually choose to put on. Due to previous bad experiences with shamans, she explained to me, she had been concerned that Don Luco or someone else had raped or molested her when she had been in an altered state. As it turns out, she had also been influenced to doubt him by the presence of a Western healer who had visited the centre the previous week and told the owner that he was “working with *brujos*”, *brujo* being used widely in the region to refer to ‘dark shaman’ or (literally) “witch”, one who is predominantly engaged in sorcery rather than healing.

Contrary to the centre owner’s instructions, Don Luco had seen me speaking with the woman when he left the *maloca* that morning and later explained that he felt it was good for us to communicate “*as women who could understand each other*”.

This episode entailed several first encounters for me - the sometimes-frightening reality of the powerful strength and effects of rainforest plant medicines; the conflict that exists between Western actors and local shamans in the ayahuasca industry; and most shockingly, the possibility of sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts. It also highlighted the gender inequality that I came to understand exists across the ayahuasca industry, particularly within the male-dominated domains of mestizo shamanism and retreat centre owners, and raised questions around the concept and issues of *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) in this context. It thus encapsulates key issues my subsequent fieldwork in the Iquitos region would focus on, and which this dissertation addresses.

The marketing and selling of strong *dietas* to Western clientele seeking “big experiences” is quite widespread and an area of contention between different actors in the ayahuasca industry

in Iquitos. This, as the woman's concerns suggested, as well as the potency of ayahuasca brews in touristic settings, has been linked to the occurrence of sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca contexts. Related to this problem, this dissertation also explores reasons for the gender imbalance and related developments, including the rise of female practitioners in the ayahuasca industry and campaigns amongst female researchers and activists to combat the problem of sexual abuse of female participants.

Disagreements and conflicts within the context of the ayahuasca industry, including around potential sexual abuse, are often expressed through *brujería* accusations. As my ethnography explores, *brujería* is an integral interconnected part of shamanic practice in the region traditionally and to the present day, contrary to commercial representations of a healing industry that sells a commodified image of 'Mother Ayahuasca'. I will address how *brujería* accusations and occurrences manifest in this context, arguing that they are prevalent, and discuss developments of understandings of and manifestations of *brujería* through the influence of Western participants and practitioners.

My analysis throughout this dissertation focuses on gender and cosmology and examines the relationship between the dualistic poles of male/female and dark/light, highlighting the ambiguities inherent in mestizo shamanism, the dynamic relatedness between these apparent dualities, and the importance of shamanic agency in negotiating between them in relation to non-human spirit entities. My research was conducted during a crucial period of transformation for ayahuasca shamanism, the related industry and its gendered contours: at the peak of 'ayahuasca tourism' in Peru followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, and, as proved most significant, including the height of the #MeToo movement and its initial aftermath.

Subject Presentation

Vegetalismo shamanism is practiced amongst mestizo ('mixed blood') communities on the riverbanks and urban areas of Amazonia, concentrated in the Amazon Basin of the Peruvian Amazon. It involves the use of medicinal rainforest plants (*vegetales*) including the psychotropic substance ayahuasca (Dobkin de Rios 1972, 1992; Luna 1986; Gow 1994; Beyer 2009). Once known only to Amazonian communities, ayahuasca (*banisteriopsis caapi*) has in recent years become a tourist attraction on a gringo trail forming in the Amazonian rainforest of Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and Peru. It is illegal in Western countries, with its active ingredient DMT listed as a schedule 1 drug according to the Convention of Psychotropic substances. However, it is a respected medicine within mestizo *vegetalismo* and the related 'ayahuasca industry', which has grown up around it, involving global participation and the establishment of ayahuasca 'retreat centres' (Peluso 2016). My fieldwork was based in the hub of the ayahuasca industry, the Loreto region of Peru, with the jungle metropolis Iquitos as its capital.

The rise of the international ayahuasca industry during the last 30 to 40 years with Iquitos, Peru as its hub, has created an influx of non-local participants in ayahuasca shamanism to the region. Based on 24 months of fieldwork research in the region between 2017 and 2021, as well as extensive preliminary and post fieldwork experience there, this dissertation looks at the current development of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region of the Peruvian Amazon through Western participation in recent years, with a particular focus on gender dynamics.

My main research question was:

- How has the practice of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism developed through Western participation in the Iquitos context, focusing on gender dynamics?

Related research questions were:

- Why are there fewer female mestizo *ayahuasqueros* and *vegetalistas* than male? How has women's participation in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism been affected by Western participation?
- How has cosmology and practice developed in the context of Western participation in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region?
- Why has sexual abuse of female participants become a problem in touristic ayahuasca contexts?

My analysis throughout this dissertation involves an interrogation of commercial and commodified depictions of ayahuasca in comparison with insider perspectives. It tracks the evolution of mestizo cosmology focusing on the influences of Western participation and describes the negotiation of relations between human and non-human agents within this framework. It also addresses the gender imbalance among practitioners of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and developing gender dynamics within the ayahuasca industry including related issues with sexual abuse. My appraisal of these forces within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism reveals the conflict between Western essentialist conceptions of dualisms within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and the more nuanced reality of mestizo Amazonian shamanism, which involves dynamic, shifting and interchangeable relations between dualistic domains.

In this thesis, I argue that the commodified image of "Mother Ayahuasca" as a purely benevolent feminine being has been propagated through the Westernization of ayahuasca shamanism and its commercialisation for Western clientele with the increased focus on healing this entails. Yet, as well as *curanderismo* (healing) practices, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism involves *brujería* (sorcery) as well as love magic (*pusanga*) and sometimes sexual seduction and abuse. I argue that the growth of Western participation and the

commercial industry has exacerbated occurrences of *brujería* and sexual abuse of female participants, both of which are rife in this context. I further argue that shamanic warfare between predominantly male shamanic rivals, centres around battles over money, power, status, and I propose, also women. Contrary to commercial representations of an omniscient “Mother Ayahuasca” with purely positive agency, local and insider perspectives emphasize the greater importance of (predominantly male) shamanic agency through which ayahuasca’s potentialities for healing and harm are mediated. While adaptations of practice through the influence of Westernization and urbanisation have made way for the greater participation of female apprentices and participants, ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region and the related ayahuasca industry remains a male dominated set of practices, which function through patriarchal hierarchies related to tradition, religion and the continued growth of the global ayahuasca industry. At the level of cosmology, in contrast to typically Western perceptions of dualities of gender and cosmology being fixed, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism involves shifting dualities of gender and cosmology whereby ayahuasca is capable of manifesting in male or female forms and within which the practices of *curanderismo* and *brujería* are not gendered. Furthermore, *curanderismo* and *brujería* are historically and contemporarily interconnected practices in which interpretations of cosmology influenced by Western participation have contributed to the emergence of novel interpretations of healing mental health problems through engagement with *brujería*.

Ayahuasca Brew and Ritual

Ayahuasca is a powerful psychotropic plant brew from the Amazon. Its name means ‘vine of the soul’ or ‘vine of the dead’ in Quechua, the language of the Incan Empire (Fotiou 2010: 8) and the *lingua franca* in the Amazon during the colonial period (Gow 1994), as well as in Quechuan Kichwa, local jungle dialect (Highpine 2013). In Quechua (or Kichwa) *aya* means dead person, spirit or soul (Whitten 1976), and *huasca* means vine (Naranjo 1983), usually

translated into Spanish as “*soga del alma*” – ‘vine of the soul’ (Beyer 2009:208). Ayahuasca is called by many different names by different indigenous groups across the Amazon including *caapi*, *dapa*, *mihi*, *kahi*, *natema*, *pinde*, *yagé*, *nishí*, *nape*, *camorampi*, *mii*, *pitujiacu*, and *tucondi* (Naranjo 1983, Schultes and Hofman 1992; Fotiou 2010:9).

The ayahuasca brew is made from the ayahuasca vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and typically, the leaves of the bush chacruna (*Psychotria viridis*) and other possible admixtures (Labate, Cavnar & Barbira - Freedman 2014:3), usually *palos*, strong trees. Toé, another powerful psychedelic plant medicine from the Datura family, is also used in the ayahuasca brew by some practitioners. Although controversial due to its reputation for being a highly dangerous plant, the use of toé is actually quite common, and appears safe when in the hands of experienced practitioners.¹

Some researchers suggest that the combination of ayahuasca (*banisteriopsis caapi*) and chacruna (*psychotria viridis*) that usually makes up the contemporary ayahuasca brew is likely to have originated in the Iquitos region possibly as recently as the 1970s (Highpine 2013). Highpine explains that; ‘From the first written observations of Ayahuasca use by Jesuit priests in the 1700s, it was the vine, or liana, whose use was recorded’ and ‘until the mid-1980s, all anthropologists who wrote about Ayahuasca use, without exception, defined Ayahuasca as *Banisteriopsis caapi*, or as vines of the *Banisteriopsis* genus’, with prominent ayahuasca researchers from the 1970s, ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes (1976; 1992) and anthropologist Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1972) referring to psychedelic admixtures *occasionally* being added (Highpine 2013). The origins and development of ayahuasca shamanism are highly debated, as I address further below, but it is generally agreed that

¹ Within my research two *ayahuasqueros* used toé in their brew.

ayahuasca brews have become stronger to appeal to Western clientele (Barbira-Freedman 2014; Peluso 2016).

Ingredients are cooked together with water for approximately eight hours, with plant material removed towards the end of the cooking process and the liquid reduced down from many litres to a thick liquid. There are several varieties of ayahuasca vine (Kaasik et. al. 2021) but *cielo* (meaning 'heaven' or 'sky') ayahuasca is the most popular and commonly used in ayahuasca preparation today, due partly to Western influence and preferences (Barbira-Freedman 2014). Chacrana contains the powerful psychedelic substance dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a naturally occurring tryptamine present in many plant, fungi and animal species, including humans (Strassman 2000). Chacrana can be replaced by or used in conjunction with other DMT containing plants such as mimosa (*M. hostilis*) or chaliponga (*Diplopterys cabrerana*). Western scientists have discovered that DMT is not usually orally active due to its inactivation by peripheral Monoamine Oxidase (MAO), present in the human digestive system but the ayahuasca vine contains harmine and other β -carboline alkaloids, which are Monoamine Oxidase (MAO) inhibitors (MAOIs), therefore rendering the DMT component of the ayahuasca brew active (Rivier and Lindgren 1972, McKenna 1984, Callaway et al. 1994: 295, Callaway et al. 1999). When ingested the brew produces psychedelic effects including visions, auditory effects, and purging (vomiting, defecating, and emotional releases).



Figure 1: the ayahuasca vine, harvested and cut in preparation for cooking.



Figure 2: Ayahuasca being cooked over a fire.

Ayahuasca is used by indigenous groups, some of the most studied being the Tukano (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971, 1975, 1981), the Shipibo (Karsten 1964, Eakin, Lauriault & Boonstra 1986, Illius 1987, Brabec de Mori 2014) and the Shuar (Jívaro) (Harner 1972, Descola 1996, Perruchon 2003); among mestizo ‘mixed blood’ communities of the Amazon (Dobkin de Rios 1972, 1992; Luna 1986; Taussig 1987; Gow 1991, 1996; Beyer 2009); as

well as within syncretic ayahuasca religions, the largest of which are the Santo Daime and União do Vegetal (UDV), established in Brazil during the 1940s and since becoming internationalised (Labate & Macrae 2010; Labate & Jungerberle 2011); within the global ayahuasca industry involving therapeutic healing retreats, most prominent in Peru (Fotiou 2010, 2014; Peluso 2014, 2016; Marcus 2022); and within neo-shamanism, the ‘new shamanism’ referred to by Atkinson (1992) originating from 1960s North America and Europe (Gearin 2016; Gearin & Saez 2021).

The uses of ayahuasca are far ranging, predominantly relating to hunting magic, warfare and collective rituals associated with social reproduction within indigenous contexts (Labate, Cavnar & Barbira Freedman 2014:3), healing (*curanderismo*) and sorcery (*brujería*) within mestizo contexts (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Luna 1986; Taussig 1987; Beyer 2009) and becoming more focused on therapeutic uses and spiritual exploration within Westernised settings (Fotiou 2010, Gearin 2016). Globalisation has led to the ‘internationalization of Peruvian *vegetalismo*’ (Labate 2014) with ayahuasca shamanism at the forefront of this ‘diaspora’ (Labate, Cavnar & Gearin 2016; Labate & Cavnar 2018). This dissertation focuses on the interaction between mestizo and Westernized practice found within ayahuasca industry contexts in Iquitos, Peru.

A Typical Ayahuasca Ceremony in Iquitos

Within the mestizo tradition ayahuasca ceremonies take place at night lasting an average of three to six hours, although they may continue up to ten hours. In local contexts they usually take place in the *ayahuasquero*’s house in a room designated for this purpose or a suitable private space, or otherwise as is more traditional, in a temporary shelter erected in the forest. Within Westernized contexts they usually take place in a *maloca*, an imagined ‘traditional’ ceremonial house (usually circular, inspired from collective houses of Northern and Central

Amazonia) used for ayahuasca ceremonies and other healing practices (Barbira-Freedman 2014). Within local settings participants sit on chairs or bench style seating and may use hammocks or beds towards the end of the ceremony. Within touristic ayahuasca centres participants are normally positioned on mattresses in a circle around the *maloca*. In both settings the ceremonial leader, the *ayahuasquero*, sits with a *mesa* (literally ‘table’ referring to a ceremonial table or similar space) in front of them upon which they have ceremonial paraphernalia including usually *mapacho* (jungle tobacco cigarettes, made from *nicotina rustica* used for protection and cleansing within *vegetalismo* practice), *agua florida* (literally ‘holy water’, a commercial floral substance with alcohol base used for cleansing and purifying), *camalonga* (a cleansing and purifying liquid made with alcohol, the *camalonga* seed, and white onion) and other medicinal perfumes and amulets.



Figure 3: The inside of a touristic maloca in which the mesa is pictured in the centre.

The ceremonial space may be *smudged*, usually with *palo santo* (from the tree meaning ‘holy wood’) and/or *mapacho* to clean and prepare the space for ceremony. At the beginning of the ceremony the *ayahuasquero* administers ayahuasca to each person individually. They normally sing or pray over the ayahuasca to bless it first before passing the cup to participants

to drink in turn. Participants take a moment to focus on their intention and make specific requests through thought or prayer before drinking, then say “*salud*” (‘health’, meaning ‘to your good health’, also “cheers”) and drink. When everyone has drunk the lights go out, as they remain for the duration of the ceremony and the *ayahuasquero*, and apprentices if there are any present, sing *icaros* (shamanic songs addressed to plant spirits) and *oraciones* (prayers) throughout to guide the ceremony. They may play the *chakapa* (traditional leaf instrument) or possibly other instruments such as shamanic pipes. *Ayahuasqueros* often do individual healings on participants using the *chakapa* and *mapacho* towards the end of the ceremony. Participants may experience purging and visionary effects throughout. Ceremonial practice varies between practitioners and participants’ experiences vary substantially.

Historical Context: From Colonialism to Commercialism

Mestizo Ayahuasca Shamanism

Mestizo ayahuasca shamanism is a branch of *vegetalismo* shamanism involving the use of medicinal rainforest plants (*vegetales*) and practiced amongst mestizo (‘mixed blood’) communities on the river - banks and urban areas of Amazonia, concentrated in the Amazon Basin of the Peruvian Amazon (Dobkin de Rios 1972, 1992; Luna 1986; Barbira-Freedman 199; Beyer 2009; Labate & Cavnar 2014). *Vegetalistas* work with the spirits of ‘plant teachers’ (Luna 1984, 1986), or *maestros* (meaning ‘master’ or ‘teacher’), also called *doctores* (doctors, healers) (Beyer 2009).²

² See Barbira-Freedman (1999) for an analysis on the rise of *vegetalismo* as a medical system in the Peruvian Amazon.

Within *vegetalismo* practice it is usual to include other rainforest plants, predominantly the barks of trees, within the ayahuasca brew as well as the key ingredients. As many as forty other plants may be added such as:

Lupuna, huacapurana, capirona, tamamuri, ayahuma, remocaspi, shihuahuaco, pinshacaspi, bobinsana, sangrehuayo, azucarhuayo, cumaceba, doctorcaspi, uvos, catahua, huacapu, chullachaqui caspi, huayracaspi, punga, camucamu, tortuga caspi, cacao, unadegato, ucho and chiric sanango.

The most comprehensive works on mestizo *vegetalismo* shamanism were produced by Marlene Dobkin de Rios, based on research in Iquitos and Pucallpa between the late 1960s and late 1980s (Dobkin de Rios 1972, 1992); Eduardo Luna based on apprenticeship style fieldwork over five years in Iquitos (Luna 1986); and Stephen Beyer (2009), based on his apprenticeship with two mestizo *vegetalistas* near Iquitos. These works describe the intermingling of ‘folk healing’ and Catholic beliefs and figures that characterize mestizo *vegetalismo* as well as relations between *vegetalistas* and ‘plant teachers’ formed through plant *dietas*, which form the core of the practice (Luna 1984, 1986; Beyer 2009). They also portray the interconnected relationship between *curanderismo* (healing) and *brujería* (witchcraft/sorcery) practices within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, describing local understandings of health and illness which emphasise witchcraft as underlying cause and underlie the connection between *brujería* (witchcraft/sorcery) and healing that is inherent within mestizo shamanic practice (Dobkin de Rios 1992; Beyer 2009). We shall see how these features of mestizo *vegetalismo* have been interpreted and developed through the influences of non-local participation in the context of the ayahuasca industry in the Iquitos region as this thesis progresses.

Shaman, Ayahuasqueros, Vegetalistas and Espiritistas

Ayahuasca practitioners are commonly referred to as ‘shaman’ (*chamán*) or the plural ‘shamans’ (*chamánes*) by non-local participants in ayahuasca shamanism, an umbrella term for spiritual healers across cultures that has been incorporated into local lexicon in the Iquitos region (Fotiou 2010).³ I will use the term shaman throughout this dissertation contextually as it was used by my research participants, and when referring to plant medicine practitioners generally covering varied specialities. ‘Ayahuasca shaman’, as they are also sometimes referred, are more specifically called *ayahuasqueros*, or the female form *ayahuasqueras*. Another local term for *ayahuasqueros*, used more usually in the urban centre of Iquitos and by older generations, is *purgero*, in reference to the purging effects of the ayahuasca brew. Most *ayahuasqueros/as* in the Iquitos region also self-refer as *vegetalistas*. Within mestizo *vegetalismo* there are various kinds of specialists of different plants, including, as well as *ayahuasqueros/as*, *tobaqueros/as* (tobacco specialists) *sanangueros/as* (sanango specialists using uchu and chiric sanango mostly (although there are many varieties), *camalongueros/as* (camalonga specialists), and *toeros/as* (toé specialists). Many *vegetalistas* are tree specialists also called *paleros* (from *palo*, wood). There are also practitioners who work with perfumes called *perfumeros/as*. Other local practitioners self-refer as *oracionistas* (from *oracion* meaning ‘prayer’), who work with prayer and express close affinity with Christianity, and also *epiritistas* (from *espíritu* meaning ‘spirit’) referring more generally to work with spirits, including but not solely, plant spirits. All these kinds of specialists may be referred to as *curanderos/as* (healers) also referred to as *medicos/as* (medics) or *doctores/as* (doctors) in local lexicon who conduct healing (*curanderismo*), or *brujos/as* (sorcerers, literally ‘witches’) who engage in sorcery or witchcraft, known as *brujería*, the local term I will use throughout this dissertation for these practices. Furthermore, Don is the male title used for shamanic

³ For a detailed discussion of the possible origins and meanings of the word ‘shaman’, and the development of understandings of shamanism within the Western imagination see Fotiou 2010: 76-98.

practitioners as a term of respect, or *maestro* meaning ‘master shaman’ or ‘teacher’. The female forms are *Dona*, or *maestra*. I will use appropriate local terms throughout this dissertation in line with how practitioners self-refer and other insiders refer to them within the context of which I am writing about, and more general terms (ie. *curandero/brujo*) or more specific terms (ie. *ayahuasquero/tobaquero*) as appropriate for the subject matter.

History and Development

The origins of ayahuasca shamanism are unknown and remain highly debated. Previously, within the literature and in line with popular perspectives, ayahuasca shamanism was presented as part of an unbroken tradition dating back to pre-Columbian times, as anthropological studies of ayahuasca shamanism within indigenous groups portrayed (e.g. the Jivaro (Shuar), Harner 1972; the Yagua, Chaumeil 1983). It was generally assumed that mestizo communities learnt ayahuasca shamanism from indigenous communities. The theory usually goes that mestizos forced to work deep in the forest by rubber barons and plighted by epidemics brought by the colonisers, learnt shamanic practice from indigenous healers whom they turned to when they became ill (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Luna 1986; Chevalier 1982; Beyer 2009). This theory is also in line with the story of the famous shaman Cordova Rios from the Iquitos region told through the popular although highly contested work, *Wizard of the Upper Amazon* (Lamb 1986) and is a widespread belief.

Yet, following the hypothesis of Peter Gow (1994), for many years scholars have suggested that the origins of ayahuasca shamanism are much later, developing predominantly during the rubber boom period in mestizo communities at the close of the 19th century (1879-1912) (Gow 1994; Bianchi 2005; Brabec de Mori 2011; Shephard 2014; Homan 2016). Peter Gow (1994) pointed to evidence that indigenous groups who escaped the effects of colonialism and the expansion of the rubber industry do not practice ayahuasca shamanism. Various

indigenous groups themselves trace their own use of ayahuasca to their adoption of practices from mestizo and even white neighbours (Gearin & Saez 2021), including the Yanasha (Santos- Granero 1991: 117), the Cashibo (Frank 1994:181), the Yudjá (Lima 2018), and the Matsigenka of the Manu region (Shepard 1998, 2014). Highpine has argued that linguistic evidence connecting ayahuasca shamanism with Amazonian Kichwa, or the ‘northern branch of Quechua’ suggests that its likely origins are to be found in the Napo River after the 16th century (Highpine 2013), a geographical point of origin agreed upon by several researchers (Weiskopf 2005:115; Zuluaya 2005:175; Brabec de Mori 2011: 24).

Following Gow, anthropologist Brabec de Mori, who is also married to a Shipibo woman, argued that ‘ayahuasca use among the Shipibo seems not to be ancient, though still well established after two centuries of practice’, (Brabec de Mori 2014: 207), and in line with Gow, traced the origins of ayahuasca shamanism to the Maynas missions, and its diffusion throughout the Ucayali basin to the mestizo and Cocama populations during the rubber boom.

Yet more recently, Carlos Suárez-Álvarez (2023) has argued convincingly that ayahuasca shamanism is indeed a more ancient practice than these theorists suggest, providing a review of the historiographical data and an alternative analysis. A point of interest I wish to highlight that his exploration of the evidence and debates reveals, is that both mestizo and indigenous groups associate power with the mixing of knowledges and cross-cultural interactions. This is in great contrast to the typically Western emphasis on an unbroken tradition and lineage.

The relationship between indigenous and mestizo forms of shamanism is complex and is not the focus of this dissertation. The Shipibo - Conibo are positioned culturally between indigenous and mestizo traditions and therefore feature within my ethnography, but its focus is on mestizo culture and practice. Whichever theories of origin are true, what is clear is that

contemporary mestizo ayahuasca shamanism developed through interactions between Amazonians and outsiders since the colonial period.

Michael Taussig contextualises the strengthening of mestizo shamanism firmly within the ‘culture of terror, space of death’ of the rubber-boom period. His exploration of this history vividly describes the horrors of rubber-barons’ treatment of ‘Indians’ including torture, rape, decapitation of children, upside down crucifixion and other horrific mass murder, and clearly connects the Putumayo region of Colombia where his research was based with the Iquitos region of Peru through the rubber trading industry, including the wholesale of rubber tappers between these regions (Taussig 1987:3 – 36). Taussig positions shamanic practices as a site of resistance against colonial powers, with sorcery stemming from the culture of terror created by colonialism, and healing manifesting as Christian redemption (Taussig 1987).

“Mixed Blood”

Mestizo literally means “mixed blood”. Mestizo communities are mainly positioned on the riverbanks and originate from the encounter between Spanish colonisers and native Indians, which began during the 16th century. The term mestizo originates from the time of the Jesuit missions and replaced a hierarchy of *wiracochas* (“white people”), *indios cristianos* (“Christian Indians”), and *indios infieles* (“pagan Indians”) that existed during this period (Gow 1994: 106). According to folktales, mestizo people are literally the descendants of intermarriage between Spanish colonisers and native people. Gow tells the story of Indian people being seduced by the manufactured goods of white people and of immigrant white men being seduced by the love magic of ‘Indian’ women (*ibid*:100).

As I will explore further throughout this dissertation, ayahuasca shamanism and wider *vegetalismo* practice reflects this ‘mixed blood’ identity. Mestizo communities are defined by the mixing of indigenous Amazonian and Western (historically Spanish) culture: where

capitalist and subsistence economies; Animistic and Catholic belief systems; urban and rural lifestyles; and biomedicine and shamanic healing, co-exist. Mestizo shamans are predominantly Catholic and their *icaros* (shamanic songs) are largely sung in Spanish, with some Quechua/Kichwa words also. As Gow argued, these features of ayahuasca shamanism and the use of Quechua/ Kichwa, are consistent with the hypothesis of the colonial origins of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism (Gow 1994: 107). Indeed, the earliest written records we have of ayahuasca use come from Jesuit Fathers (see Veigl 1785).

Although there was much resistance to the Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries, depopulation caused by the effects of colonialism including intensified slave raiding in Central Amazonia and disease and epidemics for which indigenous people did not have natural defences, caused many of them to seek refuge in communities established by the missions. It is Gow's contention that ayahuasca shamanism was developed (albeit from older practices) within these conditions (Gow 1994: 107). Indeed, he argues that the practice 'responds directly to the lived experience of illness among mestizo and native people in western Amazonia and to the historical circumstances of their affliction', that it 'evolved to cure the disease of [the] Western Amazonian colonial experience' (*ibid*: 112).

Mestizo communities occupy the physical and cultural region between the forest and the city, and as Gow suggests, can act as a 'switchpoint for knowledge between both domains' (Gow 1994: 101). The growth of the ayahuasca industry is a key contemporary example of knowledge exchange acting at the interface between rural and urban regions, as this dissertation addresses based on fieldwork in the mestizo town of Jenaro Herrera and the city of Iquitos. Research in the emerging field of 'indigenous urbanization', characterised by continuous movement between urban and rural environments, is focused in mestizo communities and interested in how the socio-cultural environment is transformed through intercultural relations at the urban-rural interface (Alexiades & Peluso 2015). As proponents

of this approach, Alexiades and Peluso argue that ‘focusing on indigenous urbanization counterbalances deep-rooted tendencies to exoticize, emplace, and essentialize the indigenous’ (Alexiades and Peluso 2015:6), as has been the tendency in relation to ayahuasca shamanism.

Contrary to many outsider perspectives that glorify indigenous people and practices, mestizo Amazonians tend to exhibit an air of superiority towards their indigenous neighbours who are deemed by them to be less civilised (Gow 1991; 1994). Being civilised within mestizo culture is also closely associated with being Christian (Gow 2009), a point I will address further in Chapter Five. Challenging theories of acculturation, Gow has argued that the adoption of Catholicism, biomedicine, and Western clothing in mestizo society is aimed at establishing peaceful social relations with powerful social Others whose perspective they come to embody (Gow 2007).

This incorporation of outsider influences can be seen to be at the heart of mestizo Amazonian culture, as also discussed by Vilaça with regards to the Wari’ adoption of Christianity as an escape from the effects of sorcery and the influences of powerful animal spirits, and a desirable alternative to their traditional position of alternation between the position of predator and prey (Vilaça 2011, 2015); and also by Santos-Granero in his application of this model to the ‘hybrid bodyscapes’ of the Yanesha of Peruvian Amazonia in postcolonial times. Contrary to theories of acculturation, Santos-Granero argues that the Yanesha’s incorporation of foreign clothing styles are the result of a long-standing indigenous openness to the Other—particularly white and mestizo Others—and the native conviction that the Self is composed through the incorporation of the Other. Pointing to the body as the foci of expression for this relatedness, shifting relationships between Self and Other over time find expression through bodily transformations, or ‘hybrid bodyscapes’ (Santos Granero 2009). It is through relations with outsiders that mestizo shamanism has developed historically and to

the present day within touristic contexts (Fotiou 2010, 2014; Marcus 2022). As I will explore throughout this dissertation, the power of mestizo *vegetalismo* is related to its mixing of knowledges, drawn from relations with outsiders (Gow 1994; Marcus 2022).

The Globalisation of Mestizo Ayahuasca Shamanism

Having been introduced to the Western world by ethnobotanist Richard Spruce at the beginning of the 20th century (Spruce 1908), ayahuasca was made more famous by the work of ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes from the 1950s to 70s (Schultes 1976) and the Beat generation classic, *The Yagé Letters*, a collection of letters between William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg telling the story of Burroughs' search for 'the final fix' and his initial experiences with yagé, or ayahuasca (Burroughs & Ginsburg 1963). It has since become popularised as a healing modality for the Western audience through what has been termed the 'Psychedelic Renaissance' (Sessa 2012) and the current age of 'psychedelic therapy' whereby psychedelic plant 'medicines' and substances are being utilized as therapeutic tools.

Multi-disciplinary studies on ayahuasca in rehabilitation and research – orientated healing centres suggest it has potential as a therapeutic tool in the treatment of various mental health problems such as addiction, depression, OCD, PTSD, and anxiety (Grob et al. 1996, McKenna 2004, Labate and Cavnar 2013; Loizaga-Velder & Verres 2014; Talin & Sanabria 2017; Rush et. al. 2021). The biopsychosocial approach to health, which sees spiritual and emotional wellbeing as connected to physical well-being and a significant causal factor in both mental illness and physical disease, is becoming popular in both clinical and non-clinical contexts (Engel 1977, Alexander 2008, Maté 2011), and accords with the predominant beliefs of global participants in ayahuasca shamanism.

According to Western frameworks ayahuasca ceremonies are defined as 'entheogenic healing', from *entheogen* meaning 'that which generates God/the Divine within', and

distinguishable from the more general category of psychedelic medicine as ‘spiritually-orientated therapeutic practice’ involving the use of plants, ritual and ceremonial aspects (Tupper 2009). The growth of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) practices across Western society reflects a rejection of rationalist and scientific thinking amongst a growing sub-culture seeking alternative forms of healing, with increasingly 'spiritual' concerns (Pal 2002; Coulter & Willis 2004). The rise of interest in psychedelic shamanism is part of a wider trend in the West that has been referred to as ‘the spiritual revolution’ or the ‘re-enchantment of the West’ entailing the movement away from institutionalised religion, and scientific rationality, towards spiritualized, subjectivized notions of reality and the Self (Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Partridge 2005a; Partridge 2005b). This movement is widely termed “waking up” in popular culture (Harris 2014), as it is commonly referred to by international participants in ayahuasca shamanism.

Ayahuasca remains outlawed across Western countries, except for limited religious use in some U.S states (Labate & Jungaberle 2011; Labate & Cavnar 2018; Labate & Cavnar 2023). Yet there has been a huge growth of interest in shamanic healing with ayahuasca during the past 50 or so years. Anthropological works have greatly contributed to its popularisation and increasing interest in indigenous cultures and shamanism (e.g. Castaneda 1968, 1971; Lamb 1971; Dobkin de Rios 1972, 1992; Harner 1980; Luna 1986, Luna and Amaringo 1991; Narby 1998; Labate & Cavnar 2014). Jane Monnig Atkinson indicated in her appraisal of ‘shamanisms today’ in 1992 that the adoption and re-working of shamanic practices in terms of Western cultural concerns and concepts is a key development that deserves scholarly attention (Atkinson 1992: 332), as this dissertation addresses for ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region at the height of its tourism industry.

As ayahuasca goes global, ceremonies are becoming much more widespread. It is now possible to partake in ayahuasca ceremonies in ‘ayahuasca churches’ in some parts of the

U.S., Europe and Australia due to religious freedom laws, although controversy over their religious classification abounds (Feeney, Labate & Hudson 2018; Labate & Cavnar 2023). Informal ceremonial gatherings are also now quite common in certain regions of the Western world.

Yet, the Western search for psychedelic spirituality was propelled to foreign lands by an attraction to ‘the exotic other’, and a desire for an ‘authentic’ experience in ayahuasca’s indigenous homeland. The attraction of the Amazonian setting and of ayahuasca shamanism itself, is that it is imagined as primitive, peaceful, naturally and socially harmonious, the antithesis of contemporary Western lifestyles, characterised by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism as an antidote to the problems caused by industrialisation and modern materialism. Although highly romanticised representations of contemporary Amazonian culture, as has been noted by anthropologists (Labate 2014; Fotiou 2014; Gearin 2016; Mesturini Cappelletti 2018), these perceptions enable a departure, that is psychological as well as geographical, from Western travellers’ home societies and cultures. Iquitos, Peru, quickly became the most popular destination for ayahuasca’s travelling clientele (Dobkin de Rios 1972, 1992; Fotiou 2010; Barbira-Freedman 2014; Losonczy & Mesturini Cappelletti 2014; Mesturini Cappelletti 2018).

The Growth of the ‘Ayahuasca Industry’

The resurgence of the counterculture movement and increasing interest in spirituality and alternative medicine in the West since the turn of the 21st century, led to and was propelled by the growth of an ayahuasca industry in Amazonia. The global ‘ayahuasca industry’ (Peluso 2016) caters to the needs of international participants in ayahuasca shamanism and involves ‘ayahuasca retreats’ comprising several ceremonies in retreat centres around the world also referred to as ‘ayahuasca centres’ or ‘healing centres.’ A high concentration of these centres

can be found in Iquitos, Peru, which is the international hub for ‘ayahuasca tourism’ or ‘shamanic tourism’, as Evengia Fotiou refers to it in her PhD thesis based there, being that it involves other shamanic practices such as plant *dietas* (Fotiou 2010). The term tourism is rejected by many insiders due to its connotations of recreation. Indeed, contrary to early characterisations of ‘ayahuasca tourists’ as ‘drug tourists’ (Dobkin de Rios 1994), Evengia Fotiou’s research in Iquitos revealed that ayahuasca tourists are primarily motivated by the desire for a spiritual self-exploration and healing experience that is lacking or denied them in their own culture (Fotiou 2010). I therefore refer more usually to ‘the ayahuasca industry’ throughout this dissertation.

The ayahuasca industry in Peru has been developing since at least the 1970s (Barbira-Freedman 2014) when ayahuasca focused trips were first advertised through magazines like *Shamans Drum* and key figures who later organised group trips from Western countries (mainly the United States) for ayahuasca ceremonies first visited (Gorman 2010). Increasing accessibility and affordability of global travel greatly contributed to the growth of the industry. Yet, it was the arrival of the internet during the 1990s that really propelled the ‘ayahuasca boom’ in Amazonia (Homan 2016), bringing knowledge of ayahuasca and ayahuasca-orientated travel to the masses. Indeed, it was during the 1990s that centres specifically catering to Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism were first established in the Iquitos region. The ayahuasca industry there has since become more formalised with the further establishment of large touristic ayahuasca retreat centres across the region as well as many smaller centres and more informal settings, which hold ceremonies and retreats, and through the establishment of connections between people working with ayahuasca in the Iquitos region and wider ayahuasca networks globally. The industry in Iquitos has experienced a decline in recent years following the pandemic although large well established

ayahuasca centres with international reputations, such as The Temple of the Way of the Light and Nihue Rao, continue to thrive.

I refer to ‘the Iquitos region’ throughout this dissertation. By this I do not mean the whole of the Maynas province or department of Loreto region, but the immediate region around the city of Iquitos where the ayahuasca industry is based: this extends to Nauta, with the road to Nauta, the Iquitos-Nauta highway being where the highest concentration of ayahuasca centres is located, across the River Nanay to Padre Cocha, down the River Marañón, and down the Ucayali River as far as Jenaro Herrera. There are approximately 150 ayahuasca providers in total across the Iquitos region, including retreat centres and individual ceremonial facilitators (for instance in a person’s home).⁴ Most of these spaces have very basic lodging and facilities. Exact numbers are not obtainable as the region is extensive, centres and ceremonial spaces often function for only short periods of time, and due to the largely informal nature of the ‘industry’ as it has become, there is no central organising body. Involved in the industry are centre owners, who are usually Western men; local and Western *ayahuasqueros* and apprentices who conduct ceremonies and healing; centre ‘facilitators’ who work as assistants within centres guiding guests through retreats (informally during my research but facilitator training and qualifications have since arisen, although controversial due to the high prices of these courses and the fact that most of them are conducted online rather than in person); and retreat participants. I will use these terms throughout this dissertation and sometimes refer to this conglomerate of people as ‘the ayahuasca community’.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in the temporary and in some cases permanent closure of ayahuasca retreat centres, thousands of people travelled to Iquitos each year to drink ayahuasca. Estimates suggest that ten of the biggest ayahuasca centres logged 4000

⁴ This statistic comes from the insider organisation in Iquitos, the Ayahuasca Safety Association (ASA).

visitors in total during 2016, the year before my official fieldwork began (Suárez Álvarez 2017). Since then, my research found that one of the biggest centres, *The Temple of the Way of the Light*, recorded 850 guests during 2019, and another large centre, *Dreamglade*, recorded 1500 over five years, an average of 300 per year, with their most successful year being 2019. Not all centre owners were forthcoming with their visitor numbers. Business resumed for some centres in full force in 2022 with the largest centres being fully booked at least 6 months in advance.

Contrary to popular belief, the commercialisation of ayahuasca shamanism is not a recent phenomenon; shamans and *brujos* were paid, usually very well, for their healing and harming powers long before the arrival of Western tourists in Amazonia (Barbira-Freedman 2014; Highpine 2018), if not always with money, then with the exchange of goods or services (Gow 1994:103). However, the impacts of commercialisation on mestizo ayahuasca shamanism through the growth of the ayahuasca industry involving Western participation has raised new problems and challenges.

A major concern of the ayahuasca industry expansion is the impact of its commercialisation on ‘traditional’ knowledge and practices (Peluso 2006, Dobkin De Rios 2006, Beyer 2009, Holman 2010, Homan 2011, Mazarrasa 2015). A near obsession with ‘authenticity’ among international participants in ayahuasca shamanism, being misguidedly associated with false images of ‘Amazonian Indians’ including false images of ‘real shaman’ (Shephard 2014) led to local performances of ‘authenticity’ in line with outsider expectations and arguably, a loss of authenticity of practice (Joralmon 1990; Dobkin de Rios 2006). Yet research in Iquitos reveals that many shamans do not typically perform to Westerners’ expectations and many Western participants have become comfortable with mestizo shamans wearing Western clothing for instance (Fotiou 2010) and other elements of traditional practices.

The globalisation of ayahuasca shamanism involving cross-cultural encounters has contributed toward the increased hybrid forms of ayahuasca shamanism, predominantly in mestizo (mixed blood) contexts (Taussig 1987, Labate & Cavnar 2014). My research tracks these developments during a period of significant transformation at the height of ‘ayahuasca tourism’ in Iquitos, Peru between 2014 and 2022, focusing on gender dynamics.

The focus and approach I take in this dissertation is distinctive from existing scholarship in the following ways. Anthropologists of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region have tended to be critical of commercialisation for Western participants. For instance, Dobkin de Rios and Beyer are highly critical of ‘ayahuasca tourism’, as they refer to it (Dobkin de Rios 2006, Beyer 2009). Yet, although Beyer apprenticed with *ayahuasqueros* who worked in the ayahuasca industry, his fieldwork was not conducted in touristic settings, and he does not include the perspectives of his teachers or other insiders on the issue of commercial centres. Several other anthropologists have conducted research in largely touristic ayahuasca settings in predominantly mestizo contexts in Peru, whose perspectives are more neutral on the subject (Fotiou 2010; Mesturini-Cappo 2018; Gearin 2022; Marcus 2022). Yet their work gives primacy to Westerners’ perspectives and makes comparisons and distinctions between Westernized practice and indigenous forms of shamanism, rather than engaging with the social category of mestizo, the specifics of mestizo shamanism and mestizo perspectives on its development through Western participation, as my work does.

Several anthropologists concur that mestizo *vegetalismo* is more focused on healing than indigenous shamanic practice (Gow 1994; Homan 2016), a feature which has become more pronounced through the growth of an industry selling ‘ayahuasca healing.’ Yet, within mestizo Amazonian shamanism healing and *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) are interrelated practices (Dobkin de Rios 1992; Beyer 2009). Contemporary research in touristic settings highlights the persistence of *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) and shamanic warfare within these

settings and furthermore, suggests that the impacts of commercialisation may even have exacerbated *brujería* occurrences (Fotiou 2010; Gearin 2022; Marcus 2022). My research engages with this problem, addressing reasons why and offering original analysis related to gender dynamics. It also explores developing and novel interpretations of the interrelation between healing and *brujería* elements of practice through the perspectives of mestizo shamans and Western apprentices within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos, Peru.

The other key problem my research addresses is the sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca contexts, which evidence suggests has increased alongside the commercialisation of ayahuasca shamanism and Western participation (Peluso 2014, Chacrana 2019; Sinclair & Labate 2019; Peluso et. al. 2020). I explore reasons for this throughout this dissertation focusing specifically on this issue in Chapter 8 where I offer novel analysis relating to the phenomenon to shamanic warfare.

Owing to the over-use of the constituent parts of the ayahuasca brew due to high demand and irresponsible practice, the environmental sustainability of ayahuasca shamanism due to Western participation is also in question (Tupper 2016; Suárez Álvarez 2019; 2020). While this debate is beyond the scope of this dissertation, my research engages with the conflict between the romanticised views of Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism and the more ambiguous reality of ayahuasca practices in the Iquitos region through an interrogation of the commodified image of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ as a healing ‘Mother Earth’ spirit sold by the ayahuasca industry.

In addition, of further relevance to my dissertation are the changing regulatory landscape in which ayahuasca practitioners operate, the MeToo movement, and shamanic warfare and its implications for practitioners and people seeking healing in ayahuasca centres.

Shamanic Warfare

Shamanic warfare refers to spiritual battles and power struggles between rival shamans. These battles often involve the use of *brujería*, specifically in the form of the firing and exchange of *virotas* (pathogenic darts), which debilitate the receiver and may be removed and sent back to the sender to remove the malady as a counter-attack, or via the stealing of shamanic plant spirit allies, which are a source of protection and power. In extreme cases, *brujería* can be used to attack and kill rivals. *Brujería* occurrences are exacerbated by social inequalities, envy and loyalty issues, and the presence of ‘outsiders’ (Taussig 1987; Beyer 2009). Shamanic warfare is an enduring feature of mestizo shamanism historically to the present day, centring around battles for power, status, money, and, as I propose in this thesis, also women. In its present-day manifestation in the ayahuasca tourism industry in Iquitos, shamanic warfare is associated with accusations of *brujería* and explanations of accidents and misfortune attributed to acts of *brujería*. As I argue in Chapter Seven, shamanic warfare has seemingly increased in the Iquitos region due to the rise of the commercial industry creating the necessary conditions for its prevalence with the professionalisation of shamanic practice across the region leading to jealousy between rival shaman in the industry and on the outskirts of it.

Regulation of the Ayahuasca Industry in Iquitos

The informal nature of the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos, involving many practitioners with varied approaches practicing between local and touristic settings across the region, and the fact that the industry is connected with the local tradition of ayahuasca shamanism there, which has functioned without government or legal intervention historically, has meant that regulation is not only difficult but considered undesirable by many insiders. However, increasing globalisation and commercialisation of ayahuasca shamanism has contributed to

problems in the field including sexual abuse of participants, incidences of *brujería* (sorcery) attacks and shamanic warfare between rivals in the industry. Several cases of death (e.g. McVeigh 2014; Houghton 2016; McDonald 2017) at the peak of ‘ayahuasca tourism’ in Peru brought safety concerns to wider public attention and led to calls from both within and outside the ayahuasca community there for regulation of the industry.

There have been efforts by some outsiders who have participated in ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos to “clean up” ayahuasca shamanism in the region, most notably made by the Ethnobotanical Stewardship Council (ESC) in 2015. This organisation was established as a safety council by a group of well-intentioned and enthusiastic Westerners with limited experience. However, the group failed to make substantial progress and was rejected by experienced practitioners, and also criticised by academics in the field⁵ for its naive and inexperienced approach to shamanism, which disregarded local traditions of practice including the interconnected relationship between *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) and *curanderismo* (healing) elements of practice.

In 2016 the Ayahuasca Safety Association (ASA) was set up by a group of experienced Western insiders in Iquitos with more success. This was in response to steps taken by regional and national government in the direction of legislating the ayahuasca industry following a string of high - profile deaths. The ASA established safety and ethical guidelines for practising centres in the region but disbanded due to a lack of funding and sufficient time to enforce these parameters of practice as well as the declining Government interest in the issues.

The ASA published safety guidelines for member practitioners in Iquitos in 2017, which – beyond basic safety protocols for conducting ayahuasca ceremonies and screening

⁵ Criticism occurred within informal conversations with the ESC as recorded in an ‘ayahuasca researchers’ google group I am part of.

participants – addressed abuses of participants in ayahuasca shamanism and included rules around sexual conduct for centre owners and ceremonial facilitators. Rule number five, ‘Respect Integrity’ states that member providers and centres of ayahuasca within the Association should “*Never sexually, spiritually, psychologically, or physically harass or abuse a participant*”, and furthermore, that they should not allow sexual relationships between shaman/ facilitators of ceremony and participants to be established during and for at least 3 months following ceremonies/retreats.⁶ Although these guidelines reflect the concerns of insiders working with ayahuasca in the Iquitos region and were influential, being adopted by most centre owners and prominent providers there, the insider organisation has been dormant since their creation. According to one of the founding members of the ASA, the inclusion of the rule on sexual conduct with retreat participants was cause for much contention amongst the group of centre owners and community actors involved, some of whom argued that there is nothing wrong with sex between shamans, facilitators and participants if ceremonial participants are willing. They also had trouble agreeing upon the period of time that should be left following retreats before relationships can be established. The five founding members of the ASA, also its governing body, were all men. With the organisation and industry being male-dominated, discussions were inevitably dominated by men. Had the organisation remained active post 2017 and the advent of #MeToo, it would perhaps have organised itself and acted differently regarding this issue. Yet, seven years later in 2024 the particular issue of how long facilitators and ceremonial leaders should wait before beginning a relationship with a ceremonial participant is still one of contention and debate

⁶ The rule is as follows: ‘5. Respect Integrity • Never sexually, spiritually, psychologically, or physically harass or abuse a participant. • Never, under any circumstances, have sexual relationships with a participant, as consent cannot be assumed or assured, even in cases when the participant approaches the practitioner. If mutual feelings or attraction exists between members or their employees and participants, members or employees must wait at least three months before beginning a romantic or sexual relationship to ensure that the connection is not exploitative. It is the member or employee’s responsibility to uphold this ethic and to inform participants of this ethical practice.’ (Ayahuasca Safety Association Safety and Ethical Guidelines for Members, 2017).

across ayahuasca contexts and communities and indeed, was one of the key topics for a panel discussion I was part of at *Medicine Festival* in the UK (Mudge et.al., *Medicine Festival*, 2024).

MeToo for the Ayahuasca Community

The sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism is widespread and became a focus for female researchers and activists in ayahuasca communities including myself (Sinclair & Labate 2019; Peluso, Sinclair, Labate & Cavnar 2020) within the climate of the #MeToo movement which took hold of global consciousness in 2017 (Loney-Howes 2019) when the term was mobilised by women in the US entertainment industry and other industries began to examine their practices and norms in the same light (King et. al. 2020). Reports of sexual abuse at the hands of *ayahuasqueros* and religious leaders began surfacing across ayahuasca communities globally (Brown 2020; Peluso, et. al 2020), in some cases reaching national and international media, including the BBC who visited Iquitos during my fieldwork to investigate (Maybin & Casserly 2020).

In the academic sphere female researchers were instrumental in bringing the problem of sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts to public attention through their scholarship and activism (Peluso 2014; Mendez 2015; Fernández, 2018; Peluso 2018; Sanchez Sarmiento 2018, 2019; Benedito & Böschemeier 2019; Molnar 2019). Awareness also spread through social media and online forums where victims, survivors, and community activists raised the alarm through written and video testimonials - a page on the Ayahuasca Forums published in 2013, was one of the first online public spaces of this kind where the issue of sexual abuse in

ayahuasca contexts was openly discussed⁷. As the hub of international ayahuasca use, Iquitos was home to several named and shamed perpetrators on this page, both local and non-local.⁸

Several cases of sexual abuse at the hands of specific *ayahuasqueros* across global ayahuasca networks have become public knowledge, with some leading to prosecution including, most notably within the Iquitos region, that of Artidoro Cardenas, a mestizo shaman who worked at an ayahuasca centre owned by Europeans at Km48 on the Iquitos-Nauta highway who was jailed for sexual abuse following a public “*denuncio*” (denunciation against him in 2005-7. Also notable is the more high-profile case of Guillermo Arevalo, a Shipibo shaman previously honoured by the Peruvian Congress for his work on sustainable development, against whom a declaration was issued by anthropologists for multiple cases of sexual abuse in Peru and elsewhere in 2015⁹ and whose case since received international media attention (Maybin & Casserly 2020), but without prosecution.

The prevalence of seduction and sexual abuse of female participants by male ‘healers’ appears to be connected with the globalisation of ayahuasca (Peluso 2014; Fernández 2018; Peluso et. al. 2020). Addressing sexual assault in Colombian ayahuasca ritual contexts, Alhena Caicedo Fernandez argues that the problem is related to the ‘urbanization and elitization of yagé consumption’ resulting in the rise of neoshamanic practice mixing traditions and practice and self-legitimised “*taitas yageceros*” with unwarranted levels of authority working at the interface between indigenous and Western cultures (2018). Another phenomenon which has been related to incidents of sexual abuse in touristic ayahuasca contexts is the increasing strength of ayahuasca brews in the context of Western participation

⁷ <http://www.forums.ayahuasca.com/viewtopic.php?f=29&t=31538>.

⁸ <http://www.forums.ayahuasca.com/viewtopic.php?f=29&t=31538&p=291464#p291464>.

⁹

https://www.reddit.com/r/Ayahuasca/comments/2u594k/warning_baris_betsa_owned_by_guillermo_ar%C3%A9valo_is/?rdt=45227.

(Barbira-Freedman 2014; Peluso 2014) creating the potential for ‘overdoses’ whereby participants are incapacitated due to the strong effects (Peluso 2016).

Drawing on evidence from fieldwork in the Madre Dios region of Peru in touristic ayahuasca contexts similar to those in Iquitos, Daniela Peluso (2014) argued that the problem of sexual abuse, although intra-cultural as well as inter-cultural, is exacerbated by clashing cross-cultural gender and relational norms as well as economic inequalities within healer-participant relationships in the current context of the globalisation and commercialisation of ayahuasca. This work, along with Bia Labate’s and my own fieldwork, inspired the creation of the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse*, an initiative of the *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Medicines* which I led, aimed at safeguarding women in ayahuasca settings and raising awareness about this issue more widely. The guide was created through collaboration with experts and informants across indigenous, mestizo, and Western contexts (Chacruna 2019). Rising awareness of the problem of sexual abuse of female participants, especially in touristic contexts, and the related issue of shamanic practitioners being predominantly male is reflected within the marketing efforts and project developments of ayahuasca centres globally in recent years, with a focus on safety and all female settings and retreats becoming prominent, including at *The Temple of the Way of the Light* in the Iquitos region.¹⁰ Indeed, several of the largest centres in the Iquitos region have hired female shamans in recent years but they work alongside male shamans who in these settings still lead the ceremonies. Rising awareness of related codes of conduct for shaman/facilitator – patient/participant relations, as well as concerns over wider safety issues in therapeutic plant medicine contexts, also led to the creation of support criteria for the ADF (Ayahuasca Defence Fund) by ICEERS (The International Center for Ethnobotanical Education,

¹⁰ E.g. <https://www.intertwiningmedicines.com/womens-retreats>;
<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=all%20female%20ayahuasca%20retreat&mid=259CA23FF084B3DDB19B259CA23FF084B3DDB19B&ajaxhist=0>.

Research, and Service) for practitioners.¹¹ First published in 2019, it stipulates that a period of 6 months should be left before sexual/romantic relations can be established with a previous patient/participant in ayahuasca and ceremonial and retreat contexts. ICEERS' guidance has not been fully accepted or integrated across Western ayahuasca communities (Mudge et. al., *Medicine Festival*, 2024).

There is still some disagreement among different actors in ayahuasca shamanism about the extent to which sexual abuse occurs in ayahuasca contexts, due largely to issues with cases being reported on account of victims and survivors not coming forward, as is common with sexual abuse cases; a lack of effective formal or legal routes to do so or in place to combat the problem within and between South American countries where much of the abuse takes place and victims' home countries; and disagreements surrounding what constitutes sexual abuse between different actors in ayahuasca contexts, as I will address in greater detail in Chapter Eight. Quantitative research published in 2020 showed that 10% of female respondents from diverse ayahuasca contexts had experienced at least one sexual boundary violation (Brown 2020). These respondents included novices as well as experienced drinkers, among which percentages would likely be even higher due to their longer experience within ayahuasca contexts involving more encounters with potential perpetrators. Within this study boundary violations were conceptualized as 'malicious or serious violations of the body' (Brown 2020: 5). The *Chacruna*' guidelines define sexual assault as involving 'a wide spectrum of abuse that can occur between healer and patient, including invasive touching, "consensual" sex between healer and participant, and rape' (Chacruna 2019). This dissertation provides further ethnographic evidence and analysis on sexual abuse in the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos, addressing controversies and ambiguities, contributing new

¹¹ <https://www.iceers.org/adf/support-criteria/>.

arguments relating the phenomenon to a prevalence of *brujería* and shamanic warfare, and interrogating my own position as both researcher and activist.

This exploration of the ‘dark side’ of ayahuasca shamanism focusing on the prevalence of shamanic warfare and sexual abuse in touristic settings, underscores my project of dismantling the myth of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ throughout this dissertation and emphasizing the ambiguities at the core of the practice and cosmology of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism.

The Field-Site

My research was conducted predominantly in Iquitos and Jenaro Herrera. My description of these field-sites focuses on gender dynamics, tourism and ayahuasca shamanism. I use the terms *gringo/s* and *gringa/s* as well as Westerners in these descriptions and throughout this dissertation contextually, as these terms are used by locals, Western residents and transient visitors.

Iquitos

Iquitos is a jungle metropolis in the Amazon basin in North - eastern Peru, and the largest city in the world not reachable by road (accessible by boat and air). Located at a little more than 300 feet (variously given as 104, 122.4 and 130 metres) above sea level and 3,084 km from the Atlantic Ocean (Lane 2016:17), it is the capital of the Maynas province and the Department of Loreto, the largest and poorest department in Peru (O’Hare and Barret 1999). Many of Loreto’s young inhabitants aim to move to its thriving capital city to be educated in one of its two universities (Universidad Nacional de la Amazonía Peruana, the state university, or Universidad Particular de Iquitos, a private institution) or The Cultural Institute (Instituto Cultural, a private institution established with the help of the U.S), find employment in one of the many shops, bars and tourism companies, and enjoy the special jungle brand of cosmopolitanism Iquitos has to offer.

Iquitos is a thriving port city positioned on the River Itaya, and between the Amazon River and the River Nanay, bordering with Colombia (nearest city Leticia) and Brazil (nearest city Manaus). Steeped in colonial history, the city has its foundations in the rubber boom period (1879 – 1912) and has since become a key tourist destination on the *gringo* trail that serves as ‘the gateway to the jungle’.



Figure 4: Map of Peru.



Figure 5: Map of Amazon river basin surrounding Iquitos.

A bustling and noisy city, Iquitos is always filled with the sound of *motocarros* (like tuk tuks), *cumbia* (popular Peruvian jungle music) and preachers on megaphones who begin during the waking hours. However, with an average temperature of 26°C, an average relative humidity of 85%¹² and the constant chance of heavy rainfall during the ‘dry’ as well as the wet season (usually around December to March), the way of life there is quite relaxed despite the chaos. Centring around a rather impressive *Plaza del Armas* with its Cathedral and colonial relics, Iquitos consists of four districts: the city of Iquitos, Punchana, Belén, and San

¹² <https://www.timeanddate.com/weather/peru/iquitos/climate>.

Juan Bautista. In 2015 the population of Iquitos was recorded at 471,993 in *Lonely Planet*¹³ and ‘fast approaching half a million’ by John Lane in 2016 (Lane 2016:18). World population statistics show that the population in 2021 was 477,000¹⁴ but many locals say it is in the region of 600,000; exact statistics are impossible to obtain as Iquitos keeps growing without regulation.

Iquitos was founded as a city in 1864 but its history dates back to the 1750s with the establishment of Jesuit reductions, missionary villages, on the River Nanay (Lane 2016). Its name is taken from the indigenous group Iquito who lived on the Nanay River, presumably its first inhabitants, probably gathered along with other indigenous people from the region by missionaries, but local mythology tells a different tale. It is said that the indigenous Iquito people fled their homes in the jungle and moved to the site of Iquitos known locally as Ninuroumi because of a witchdoctor who became a jaguar. Most wanted to stay in Ninuroumi but several of them remained and killed the jaguar. According to folktale, there are nine pure blood indigenous people left in Iquitos.¹⁵

Beginning with the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, the devastating effect of colonialism on the indigenous Amazonian population of Peru has been well recorded (e.g. Weinstein 1983; Stanfield 1998; Fotiou 2010: 30-46) and continued well into the 19th century supported by the Peruvian Government who allowed large corporations to take control of huge areas of rainforest and destroy indigenous communities in exchange for debt relief. During the 19th and 20th centuries indigenous people were either killed or had to migrate their lands, with some finding refuge within missionary communities (Hill 1999).

¹³ <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/peru/amazon-basin/iquitos>.

¹⁴ <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/22076/iquitos/population>.

¹⁵ This story was told to me by a local expert historian of the region, jungle guide and storyteller.

Iquitos was at the centre of the rubber boom (1879 – 1912) and grew exponentially during the rubber boom years attracting thousands of immigrants from around the world, largely men who made their fortunes there, and many of whom will have had children with and married local women. Slave labourers from indigenous groups such as the Witoto, Bora and Andoke, along with mestizos who entered voluntarily, made up the workforce (Zerner 2000:94). Whilst they experienced extreme conditions working deep in the forest, foreign rubber barons lived luxurious lifestyles in the city. Iquitos is still filled with colonial style buildings,



Figure 6: *Casa de Fierro (iron house), Iquitos.*

albeit somewhat dilapidated now, relics of European influence from this period, including *Casa de Fierro* ('the iron house'), reputedly designed by architect Gustave Eiffel who designed the Eiffel Tower, one of the first 'pre-fabricated' houses brought to Peru, purchased by the rubber tycoon Julias H. Toots and brought to Iquitos in 1890 (Lane 2016). *Casa de Fierro* now houses a restaurant upstairs and a shop selling souvenirs, musical instruments, tobacco and smoking paraphernalia downstairs.

During the rubber boom period the population grew exponentially along with the rubber barons' and the city's wealth. According to anthropologist Anne - Christine Taylor, in 1850 there were 277 inhabitants but by 1867 the population had reached 15,000 (Taylor 1999). Since this period it is clear that Iquitos has continued to grow at a rapid rate. This is due largely to its natural resources and the growth of extractive industries encouraged by 'development' focused central Government policies: Iquitos is the key exporter of lumber

from the Amazon globally, and a key source of oil and mineral resources for the rest of the world (Lane 2016) as well as being an exporter of many other products such as tobacco and cotton (Rumrill 1983). Following the rubber boom, its growth has also been propelled by further ‘booms’: the ‘coca boom’ during the 1970s and 80s and most recently of course, the ‘ayahuasca boom’ (Homan 2016).

There is still a large immigrant community in Iquitos from the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. Some have business interests in extractive or related industries, some have Government positions (such as the British and Austrian Consuls), run charitable organisations, or run businesses in the city such as bars, restaurants and hostels, as well as ayahuasca lodges. Interestingly, Fotiou indicated that ‘nearly all of them are married to local women’ (Fotiau 2010:26), showing without explicitly stating that most of them are men. The gender imbalance amongst non-local residents is clear. There is no doubt that most expatriates in Iquitos and indeed longer-term Western visitors to the region are male. However, there are also several Western women living there as well as Western couples. I will address the gender imbalance and recent developments throughout this dissertation. Improved transport and the wider impacts of globalisation have also attracted many immigrants from nearby jungle and riverside communities to Iquitos, and tourism has played a huge part in its growth.

According to *IPeru* approximately 130,000 international tourists visit Iquitos each year. In the early 2000s numbers were over 300,000 per year but numbers have dropped since 2014, perhaps because other nearby destinations such as Colombia became more accessible to tourists and gained in popularity, and possibly also due partly to this time being a peak for ayahuasca tourism and ayahuasca becoming more widely available globally since.

Iquitos has a reputation for being more liberal than many parts of Peru and this difference in culture is often popular with foreign travellers as well as a source of pride for some of the

local community. It is for instance open to gay and transgender people being a haven historically and to the present day for those fleeing persecution from more conservative parts of the country and the wider region, and one of the leading centres in the country in recent political movements to establish equal rights for the LGBT community (ILGA: Carroll, A & Mendos, L.R. 2017).

Within the city itself, on the surface there is not so much to occupy or impress tourists. Much time is spent by Western residents and tourists in Iquitos sitting and talking in cafes, of which there are several owned by ex-patriates to cater especially to international clientele. *Dawn on The Amazon* is a favourite with passing tourists, and the *Amazon Bistro* is the favourite hang-out for Western residents and long-term visitors, where I passed many hours during fieldwork. These both sit on the boulevard, or *malecón* (promenade), which looks out over the River Itaya and the Amazon rainforest and stands above the barrio of Belen, the poorest part of Iquitos, a kind of shanty town built on stilts above the water, much of which floods during the rainy season.

Local and travelling artisans sell their jewellery and crafts along the *malecón* and there is also a small arcade housing artisan shops and local visionary artists market over the river and the nearby Shipibo market, established in 2020 on the *Plaza del Armas*. Shipibo women sit together during the day along the *malecón* and around the central city selling their beautiful handwoven textiles and handicrafts, which largely relate to ayahuasca shamanism, for which they are famous for. The Shipibo are not indigenous to Iquitos but many of them now live there, having moved from Pucallpa and villages along the Ucayali River. At night the *malecón* is alive with local performers, musicians and traders and the city's restaurants and bars are usually full and open late into the night.

The ethnographic museum (*Museo Amazónico*), also positioned along the *malecón*, is a good source of information about indigenous groups in the region, housing indigenous crafts, sculptures and paintings along with some detailed descriptions of community life and culture. There are several indigenous groups from the nearby region: the Huitoto, Bora and Ocaina belonging to the Bora linguistic group (Moseley 2007); the Yagua belonging to the Peba Yagua linguistic group (Seiler-Baldinger 1994); the Cocama and the related Kukama belonging to the Tupi-Guarani linguistic group (Flowers 1994a); and the Matsés (Mayoruna) belonging to the Panoan linguistic family (Flowers 1994b), as well as several smaller groups including the Iquito from the Záparo linguistic family (Fotiou 2010). It is possible for tourists to visit some of these groups, the Bora Bora for example and also the Kukama in various parts of the region, including *Padre Cocha* across from the port Nanay, or the Matsés deeper in the forest from the Ucayali, but tourists are usually disappointed due to the performative quality of the experience and what is felt by them to be a lack of ‘authenticity’. Indigenous groups in the region have been greatly affected by globalisation, have commercial items, access to electricity and the internet, not living in isolated harmony with nature as some tourists might naively expect. The Matsés are also famous for their use of *kambo* (also known as *sapo* meaning frog), literally poison taken from specific frogs that is used as a medicine traditionally for hunting to improve sight and reactions and has become world renowned as a treatment for a myriad of physical and mental health issues and as an immune system booster (Hesselink 2018).

This and other local medicines are available at Belen market (*mercado Belen*), a huge local market selling everything from fish to flashlights, including machetes, hammocks, kitchen supplies, vegetables, and wild animals, and another key attraction and experience for tourists.

“The medicine aisle” as it is lovingly referred to by Western expatriates and tourists, selling rainforest plants and remedies including bottled ayahuasca as well as the raw ingredients along with love potions and a myriad of interesting amulets and substances, was positioned on *Pasaje Paquito* but moved indoors following closure and relocation of different parts during the Covid - 19 pandemic. Also of interest to some tourists and researchers in



Figure 7: *Pasaje Paquito* (“the medicine aisle”) before its relocation, *Belen market*.

Iquitos are the *Biblioteca Amazónica* (the Amazon Library), an incredible resource

on the Amazon region; the *Instituto de Investigaciones de la Amazonía Peruana* (IIAP) and the *Herbarium Amazonense*, both great sources of information on rainforest plants in the region.

Ecotourism is the main attraction for most tourists in Iquitos, being as it is the primary ‘jumping-off point’ from which to explore the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, and to hopefully see some of the many thousands of species of plants and animals that live there: approximately 25,000 species of plants, 4,000 species of butterflies, and 2,000 species of fish are said to inhabit the Amazon region (Fotiou 2010: 26). As well as jungle-tours ecotourism in the region includes trips down the Amazon River and its tributaries, the Itaya, the Nanay,

the Ucayali and the Marañón all being easily accessible. Tourists are also likely to visit the Butterfly Farm (*chakra de mariposas*) and Monkey Island (*Isla del monos*), which are easily accessible from the port of Nanay. Fotiou indicates that at the time of her fieldwork most tourists in Iquitos were backpackers (Fotiou 2010: 26). Whilst this may still be the case, the tourism industry in the region has since developed to cater much more to wealthier travellers and holiday makers, including many domestic tourists as well as international.

Furthermore, at the time of Fotiou's research 'few people came to Iquitos exclusively for shamanic tourism' but otherwise heard about ayahuasca after their arrival (Fotiou 2010: 26). This I would argue is no longer the case. Whilst ecotourism is still the main source of tourism in Iquitos, since Fotiou's research the ayahuasca industry has grown significantly, attracting thousands of visitors each year (excluding 2020 with the pandemic) who arrive with the primary and often sole intention of drinking ayahuasca.

Although it was ayahuasca that attracted many of the recent Western settlers in Iquitos, many long - term visitors and Western residents do not partake in ayahuasca ceremonies. Some are uninterested and engaged in other activities and business in the area. Many continue spiritual and shamanic practice of other forms. For most this does not constitute a rejection of ayahuasca but rather a preference for other plants or practice. Some partake in ayahuasca ceremonies infrequently and often emphasise the need to integrate what they have learnt between ceremonies. There is also of course no necessity to do several ceremonies in a row when it is accessible.

Iquitos is a place of paradoxes. As a hub for ayahuasca and 'shamanic tourism', people flock from all over the world there for healing. Yet, there is also a huge problem with drug abuse and it is easy to get hold of almost any substance of choice. Cocaine is one of the most

popular and available drugs in the region and the cheaper base product *pasta* most used by the local homeless and street dwellers, of which there are many. It is not uncommon for travellers who intended to cure drug addiction through ayahuasca and other plant ‘medicines’ to fall back into drug addiction in the city, and several insiders live between these lifestyles. There is also a serious problem with sexual abuse, particularly of minors, within which according to hearsay at least, ex-patriates are implicated, and of women within the ayahuasca industry itself (as well as more widely), as Chapter Seven of this dissertation addresses. Indeed, it could be said that the city of Iquitos like its shamanism, reflects the ‘dark’ and ‘light’ of existence, being side by side and interconnected aspects of the whole.

Jenaro Herrera

Most of my preliminary fieldwork between 2014 and 2016 and the first four months of my research fieldwork was based in a touristic shamanic healing centre owned by Don Luco Navarro in the mestizo town of Jenaro Herrera. Jenaro Herrera is about 200km from the city of Iquitos, reachable by boat. The town borders the edge of the Pacaya-Samira Rainforest Preserve and is about a ten-minute boat ride from the National Forest, in one of the most biodiverse regions of the Amazon.

The town of Jenaro Herrera sits on the banks of the Ucayali River between the cities of Iquitos and Requena. It has a population of approximately 6000, which has grown exponentially during the last ten years. The name Jenaro Herrera is of Spanish origin and therefore representative of the meeting of Amazonian and Spanish culture that mestizo communities entail. According to locals, it was a small native *Trapuena* community who first claimed the land as a *chakra* (farm), but Jenaro Herrera was not established until 1954 by a man with the same name, who was a lawyer and journalist who arrived through a program

from Lima. This was a period of great transformation for the region of Loreto. During and following the 1960s, Loreto underwent economic, social and political transformation with modernisation, the expansion of citizenship and integration with the rest of Peruvian society (Santos-Granero 2000). Jenaro Herrera, like Iquitos, includes openly homosexual and transgender people in its community. The increase of openly homosexual and transgender people in Jenaro Herrera seems partly to be due to the influence of globalisation and growing connections with the city of Iquitos during the past fifty or so years.

The mixing of indigenous Amazonian and Spanish culture, and more recently Western influences more generally, is evident in the way of life in Jenaro Herrera. The local community live in wooden houses, which they build themselves. They are largely reliant on the forest for their subsistence, engaging in hunting and fishing or buying produce from other locals. Yet, many of them have mobile phones and large televisions, with electricity having arrived in the town in 2007, and now available to everyone from 6pm until 10pm most nights (although power cuts are common). Employment in the town is now quite varied with subsistence practices still central to community life but also, the arrival and sale of commercial products becoming widespread, as well as the growth of the local transport industry and even modern club culture making an impact in recent years. There are two schools, one primary and one secondary in Jenaro Herrera and a nursery, a basic hospital and pharmacist. Most local people use the hospital and pharmacy but many of them also engage in shamanic healing. Christianity is widespread in the town. Indeed, everybody seems to identify as *cristiano* (Christian). Yet, there are several denominations of Christianity present in Jenaro Herrera including Catholics, Evangelists, Jehovah's Witness and Multifaith churches and congregations. 'Multifaith' churches there are generally Christian. Of nine functioning churches in Jenaro Herrera, only one is Catholic, one is Jehovah's Witness and seven are Evangelical churches, with Evangelicalism becoming much more established there

and in the wider region in recent years. There are also temporary ‘pop-up’ churches, usually called ‘free churches’ (“*iglesias libre*”), being open to anyone, that congregate in people’s houses or community spaces, a phenomenon that became popular towards the end of my research (2019-2022). Whilst Catholicism is integrated within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, it is interesting to note that evangelicalism and other denominations of Christianity present in the region are averse to shamanic practice, a point I will explore further in Chapter Five.

Spanish surnames are common in the community of Jenaro Herrera, including Torres, Llerena, and Navarro, surnames within the shamanic group and wider family with whom I lived. Most locals self-refer as mestizo and describe themselves as “*una mezcla*” (‘a mixture’) of native people (*nativos*) and white people (*gente blanca*), sometimes indicating that they speak Spanish rather than a local dialect, a defining feature of mestizo people in comparison to indigenous neighbours. Mestizo culture is privileged by the local population above indigenous or *nativo* culture and people. Some locals tell the story of native men stealing and having sex with immigrant white women from missionary groups in the past in the belief that they would acquire some of their power, wealth, and *cultura* by doing so, having white children who could speak Spanish and would naturally acquire *gringo* characteristics. As well as being a folktale about mestizo people’s origins, this story is told in jest implying the greater sophistication of themselves and other mestizos in comparison to *nativos*.

Jenaro Herrera is famous in the region for its buffalo cheese. As well as being made and sold in the town, the cheeses are sold in various shops in Iquitos and other parts of the region.

Buffalo cheese is also sold to passengers on *lanchas* and *rapidos* when they pull in to Jenaro Herrera’s port.



Figure 8: Lancha arriving at Jenaro Herrera port.



Figure 9: A view of Jenaro Herrera from the River Ucayali.

There are two *rapido* (speedboat) businesses run from Iquitos with representatives in the town, that have developed with the increase of tourism to the area, and which run between Iquitos and Requena stopping at towns and villages on route. Locals travel more usually by *lancha*. Lanchas are large cargo and passenger boats that travel up and down the Ucayali River every two or three days between Iquitos and Requena stopping at ports and communities on the riverbanks, Jenaro Herrera being the biggest town along this route. They

transport produce such as sugarcane, plantains, gas, maize, beer and soft drinks, other food produce, and sometimes motor-taxis.

Men in the town typically find long-term employment either through lumber companies or shipping companies connected with the *lanchas*. Men also work as moto-taxi drivers, which has become more common in recent years as the manufacture of motor-taxis has increased in the region, and roads have been built in Jenaro Herrera to accommodate vehicles, a development which continued during my time there and was greeted with great enthusiasm by the locals. Motor-taxis carry passengers throughout the town and enable travel down the *Carretera* towards Brazil, leading to popular bathing spots, buffalo farming fields, a couple of tourist lodges used for jungle tours and ayahuasca retreats, and the Plant Conservation and Investigation Centre (ILAP), a centre with an expansive cultivated forest used mainly for research and the sustainable growth of trees for timber. It also has laboratory facilities which are used by biologists who visit for fieldtrips from Peruvian and international universities and organisations. Men also provide the security for ILAP and make up the local police force. The schools, hospital and pharmacist provide employment for both men and women. There are also coca fields in the nearby region with some local men and women becoming involved in the illegal cocaine industry working at the bottom of the chain in manufacture and smuggling.

Jenaro Herrera is well known across the region for being a hotbed of shamanic activity, with a high concentration of *curanderos* (healers) and many argue, *brujos* (dark shaman, literally ‘witches’) living there. There are several shamanic families or groups, often engaged in shamanic warfare with each other. For this reason, it was not appropriate for me to interact with practitioners there outside of those related to Don Luco with whom I did fieldwork, and

his wider shamanic group. Throughout this dissertation I refer to Don Luco, his son Jolker and a Master shaman in the town connected with them who I shall simply call El Maestro.

Tourism to Jenaro Herrera has been greatly impacted by the growth of the ayahuasca industry in the region attracting Westerners to engage in ayahuasca ceremonies and retreats with local *ayahuasqueros*. A couple of these have simple touristic lodges, such as Don Luco's, or otherwise hold ceremonies in their homes. Jenaro Herrera tends to attract Westerners who want to "get off the beaten track" or who are more experienced ayahuasca drinkers, familiar with a particular *ayahuasquero* through doing ceremonies with them in a large touristic centre closer to Iquitos.

The mestizo participants in my research from Jenaro Herrera view intercultural encounters largely positively, and furthermore, I would argue, as integral to the development of their culture and indeed, to the development of their shamanic practice. Don Luco's family and others in the wider community were usually very welcoming to *gringos* and take pride in acquiring clothing and objects from the Western world and demonstrating their connections with *gringos* to the wider community. For example, Don Luco has a large collection of baseball caps he has acquired as gifts from ayahuasca retreat participants over the years and, as I observed with horror one day, he sometimes hangs an American flag from his balcony. When I asked him about this saying it was probably quite unattractive to tourists, he explained that it was customary within mestizo society to hang the country flags of those with whom you have worked and encouraged me to bring an English flag for him to display.

He describes mestizo shamanism as "*combinations with white people*" and explains that for this reason they speak of the need "*to share*" (*compartir*) knowledge, as was often emphasised by him and other mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in my research. Not all practitioners and other locals agree. The tension between the desire to share knowledge with outsiders and

acquire knowledge from outside as a source of power can be felt throughout my ethnography and is characteristic of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and its representation of relatedness between human cultures as well as human and non-human realms.

These inter-cultural and inter-species relationships are the focus of my analysis throughout this dissertation, an outline of which is as follows.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One: Theoretical Background

Chapter One provides the theoretical background to my research positioning this dissertation in the Anthropology of the non-human, inspired by ‘the ontological turn’ in Anthropology and other disciplines, and drawing on Amerindian, animist, ecofeminist and gender focused studies. I introduce ayahuasca as an active and alive agent of cultural development and change who appears at the centre of my ethnography within a relational field encompassing shamanic practitioners, participants in ayahuasca shamanism, and non-human entities. My approach takes seriously the perspectives of my research participants in considering ayahuasca as both spirit and substance, whilst highlighting the importance of shamanic agency, and positioning inter-species relationships at the core of my analysis throughout this dissertation. The final sections of this chapter address the theme of gender and sexuality as the main focus of this analysis and apprenticeship as anthropological research method, foregrounding my own ethnographic research.

Chapter Two: The *Gringa* Apprentice – Fieldwork and Methodology

Chapter Two describes my research journey from ayahuasca novice in 2014 to becoming an apprentice and ayahuasca centre facilitator, conducting anthropological fieldwork between 2017 and 2021 and becoming a community activist through my work with *Chacrana Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines* on sexual abuse. Positioning myself clearly as an insider as

well as a researcher, I present my research methods and approach and explain how my fieldwork and research interests evolved around my role as a *gringa* participant and apprentice in ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos, and later community activist.

Chapter Three: Mestizo Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Ayahuasca Industry

Chapter Three looks at the development of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism from its origins in the colonial period to its contemporary manifestations with commercialisation and the growth of the ayahuasca industry involving Western participation. I describe the foundations of ayahuasca shamanism including the *vegetalismo dieta* and the interconnected practices of *curanderismo* (healing) and *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) related to understandings of illness and healing in local contexts, and the growth of a spiritual healing industry covering Western participant motivations and differences between local and touristic practice. I then discuss ethical debates around the participation of Westerners and its impacts and address developments and controversies relating to my topic of gender dynamics: male dominance of the ayahuasca industry; menstruation taboos; beliefs around pregnancy and rising demand for (female) *ayahuasqueras* in the wake of Western participation.

Chapter Four: Gender Bias Among Shamanic Practitioners

This chapter addresses the gender bias amongst shamanic practitioners. I discuss reasons for the male bias amongst shamanic practitioners in mestizo communities related to tradition and the existence of gendered domains in mestizo communities, drawing on ethnographic evidence and local perspectives. I then describe recent developments due to urbanisation, commercialisation and Western participation which, I argue, have led to the greater participation of women, and specifically *gringa* apprentices. My arguments revolve around the core practice of *dieta*, through which relations between *ayahuasqueros* and *vegetalistas* and master plant spirits are formed, and through which shamanic power in this context is

acquired. My analysis in this chapter also highlights the issue of sexual abuse and its relation to the gender bias.

Chapter Five: The Rise of “Mother Ayahuasca”

This chapter focuses on the commodification of the ayahuasca spirit as “Mother Ayahuasca” by the commercial ayahuasca industry. Basing my analysis on historical and ethnographic evidence, I argue that “Mother Ayahuasca” has been essentialised through a process of commercialisation involving Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism being in line with Western participants’ eco-feminist concerns, and a fitting representative for Western participants’ cultural revolt. I propose that conceptions of an omniscient “Mother Ayahuasca” are adopted by Western participants in ayahuasca ceremonies and retreats through a process of socialisation, highlighting the conflict between commodified images of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ and insider perceptions of ayahuasca as a much more ambiguous entity.

Chapter Six: Christian Cosmology and Hybrid Forms

Chapter five describes the syncretic cosmology of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, which incorporates different religious and spiritual traditions and perspectives, and through which mestizo ayahuasca shamanism has developed and evolved. My discussion addresses the formation of allegiances and pacts between shamanic practitioners and spirits within a predominantly Christian framework, manifesting as healing and/or *brujería*, and the re-incorporation of the Christian pantheon into some Western participants’ and practitioners cosmovision through engagement in ayahuasca shamanism. I also describe how local practice has been adapted by mestizo shamans working within the tourism industry according to Western preferences, becoming more focused on “Mother Ayahuasca” and address the influence of Eastern spirituality and philosophy on mestizo ayahuasca shamanism through Western influence and wider spiritual allegiances formed through shamanic practice. My

discussion emphasises the importance of shamanic agency for negotiating relations with ceremonial participants with multiple religious and spiritual orientations, and with non-human entities connected with shamanic capacities for healing or harm, and highlights the co-existence of multiple cosmological perspectives within this context.

Chapter Seven: “The Dark Side” of Ayahuasca Shamanism

My discussion in this chapter addresses the ubiquity of *brujería* as a part of shamanic practice acknowledging that every shaman is also to varying degrees a *brujo* (sorcerer). I outline conditions that are associated with accusations and occurrences of *brujería* in mestizo communities, conditions which, I argue, are also evident in the ayahuasca industry context, and compare local and touristic contexts describing how *brujería* and shamanic warfare manifest within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos, fuelled by competition over power, money, status, and women. I argue that the commercialisation of ayahuasca shamanism for Western clientele has contributed to the eclipsing of “*the dark side*” of the practice, as it is sometimes described by Western practitioners, but that this and wider conditions have actually had the effect of exacerbating shamanic warfare and *brujería* accusations and occurrences. I also explore how local conceptions of *brujería* have been adopted by Western practitioners and provide an autoethnographic account. My discussion reveals how novel understandings and interpretations of *brujería* have emerged through ayahuasca’s appropriation for healing mental health problems amongst Western participants.

Chapter Eight: Sexual Abuse within the Ayahuasca Industry

This chapter addresses the problem of sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism. I discuss how sexual abuse typically manifests in this context with reference to case studies from my fieldwork and wider research on this issue. I argue that the commercial and patriarchal organisation of the ayahuasca industry has intensified the potential for sexual

abuse to take place and contributed to it being covered up by the commercial industry in Iquitos. I also address challenges faced in the production and dissemination of the *Chacruna Guidelines for the awareness of sexual abuse* on the ground in Iquitos. My discussion in this chapter engages with local beliefs and practices surrounding ayahuasca that are related to sexuality and romantic love, in comparison to Western perceptions and commercial representations of ayahuasca, and examines ideas about medical and ethical codes of conduct, addressing how cross-cultural beliefs and practices interact, conflict, and have developed within touristic ayahuasca settings. I highlight the ‘grey areas’ that exist in touristic ayahuasca contexts around sexual seduction and abuse and the multiple and sometimes contradictory moralities related to different cultural perspectives and practices evident in these settings.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions

The concluding chapter addresses how my thesis has dismantled of the myth of “Mother Ayahuasca” emphasizing ayahuasca’s ambiguity related to the dynamic dualities of gender and cosmology within mestizo ayahuasca practice and negotiated through the vehicle of shamanic agency. I track the predator/prey motif throughout my thesis relating to male shamanic agency and sexual abuse and discuss developing and novel understandings of healing and *brujería* my research revealed. I also address wider considerations related to the themes of my research and outline avenues for further research. Finally, I reflect on my position as a researcher-activist in the field.

Chapter One: Theoretical Background

Being far more than a passive pawn in the human game, ayahuasca is considered an active and live agent of cultural development and change by ayahuasca drinkers, both locally and globally. My research explores the development of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos through this lens, following the growing trend in anthropology for research that engages with the non-human. In the case of my research, ayahuasca is of central importance as the substance and spirit through which my research participants *connect*, as my Western research participants so desired to do with each other, and with other entities and dimensions, and as the vehicle through which cultural exchange is mediated - the *intercambio* (exchange) my Peruvian research participants emphasised and idealised when speaking about their relationships with *gringos*.

My approach draws on Ecofeminist, Amerindian, and animistic approaches to the study of the non-human, approaches that have contributed to and been influenced by a recent shift in perspective across anthropology and other disciplines known as ‘the ontological turn’ (Heywood 2017; Bryant, Harman & Srnicek 2011). The ontological turn in anthropology encompasses various fields of anthropology drawing on diverse cultural contexts and involves a renewed focus on ways of *being* in the world.. Traditional anthropological practice implies the existence of an underlying universal nature of the world that is simply viewed from different perspectives through different cultural lenses, whereas the ontological turn proposes that we consider how worlds might vary, as opposed to merely worldviews (Heywood 2017). Furthermore, the ontological turn contains a critique of anthropocentrism, maintaining that non-human objects exist independently from human beings and granting them equal importance (Harman 2002; Bryant, Harman & Srnicek 2011).

The granting of equal rights to ‘things’ in the research and resultant text can be understood as part of the post-modern, post-colonial movement in Anthropology (e.g. Olsen. 2003; Fowles 2008, 2010; Latour 1993, 2005; Miller 2005; Strathern 1988). Within this movement Marilyn Strathern and Donna Haraway have contributed greatly to developing relational approaches within anthropological study that recognise humans and non-humans as compositional beings, encompassing multiple beings and relations (Strathern 1988; Haraway 1985, 2003, 2008). A relational approach is suitable for the study of ayahuasca shamanism, as advocated by Mesturini Cappo who has presented the hypothesis of an “entangled ayahuasca” in which ‘a relational approach to ayahuasca as an agent’ is deemed appropriate, but in which ayahuasca is ‘more than a substance and more than a singular entity capable of agency’, but rather a ‘relational space’ that entails and facilitates intercultural and even interspecies communication. Whilst highlighting ayahuasca’s negative as well as positive potentialities, her narrative focus on “what ayahuasca wants” reflects the typically Western and commercial emphasis on ayahuasca’s agency (Mesturini Cappo 2018). My approach is also relational but emphasizes rather the importance of shamanic agency upon which ayahuasca’s negative and positive potentialities hinge, as we shall see throughout this dissertation.

Commodity and Spirit

Ayahuasca has been depicted as a commodity at the centre of an ‘entrepreneurial ecosystem’ in Peru (Peluso 2016), and global market (Tupper 2016) sold and proliferated through the internet (Conrad 2018; Holman 2010, 2011) and the prized resource in the most recent ‘boom’ in South America (Homan 2016). Prominent narratives of the growth of ayahuasca tourism’ and internationalised use have tended to portray ayahuasca and Amazonian actors within the ayahuasca industry as passive victims of globalisation. In line with anthropological theories of commoditisation of local cultural practice in the tourism industry (Greenwood 1989, Bruner 2005), ayahuasca tourism is widely perceived as destructive to indigenous

culture (Dobkin De Rios 2006, Beyer 2009, Holman 2010, Homan 2011, Mazarrasa 2015). However, I would argue that these perspectives conflict with wider Amazonian studies as they reflect a static view of Amazonian culture and ignore the agency of local actors in processes of social change (Alexiades & Peluso 2015, High 2015). . Whilst I do not wish to discount neo-colonial perspectives entirely as they raise significant issues, I am choosing to follow the narrative of my research participants and the more radical and recent approaches of anthropologists to the non-human in giving ayahuasca ‘the voice it deserves’ (Russell 2019) as an active agent of its own globalisation, a live entity engaging in human relations. In his *Anthropology of Tobacco*, Andrew Russell makes tobacco the protagonist of its own tale of world domination – depicting tobacco as a spirit as well as a commodity (Russell 2019). As he sets out, his approach is more radical than that of anthropologists previously who have emphasised the agency of objects whilst maintaining their dependence on human relations (e.g. Gell 1998; Geismar 2011; Miller 2009). According to the perspectives of the majority of my research participants, ayahuasca is in theory capable of interacting independently of human relations – with other non- human entities – although in practice for them, manifesting in its relational capacity with human actors, as it does throughout this dissertation.

Following Haraway, Holbraad makes a distinction between humanist and post-humanist approaches, with humanist approaches giving meaning to ‘things’ only through association with the human, and post-humanist approaches going beyond this by granting meaning to things independently of their relations with human actors. However, as Holbraad suggests, this has proved to be problematic for anthropologists (Holbraad 2011). Russell has taken up the challenge in presenting tobacco as an active agent in and of itself, turning tobacco from what he refers to as a ‘less than human’ thing into a ‘more-than human’ entity, inviting his reader to consider tobacco as ‘a conquering hero or villain with which we are all, to some

extent, entangled’ (Russell 2019: 2), and exploring its ambiguous identity as both ‘spirit and commodity’ (*ibid*: 11). Holbraad distinguishes between approaches that are purely methodological and those that take the radical ontological perspectives they represent seriously (Holbraad 2017). Russell’s approach is tongue in cheek, a worthwhile methodological exercise for his project, but not necessarily to be taken literally. My approach falls into the second category. While Russell acknowledges that some indigenous peoples consider tobacco as having a spirit, this is not the reasoning behind his decision to give tobacco agency in his work, *as it is in mine*, whereby the decision to acknowledge ayahuasca’s agency and that of other plant spirits, was inspired by the beliefs of my research participants, the majority of whom –indigenous, mestizo and Western– relate to ayahuasca as a spiritual entity.

Anthropological approaches to the non-human have tended to group all non-human things together. These approaches reflect Rationalist scientific perspectives ontologically, which essentially view Nature as inanimate as they view man-made material objects. Amazonian anthropologist Eduardo Kohn has suggested that: ‘At stake is how to think about “nonhumans”’. He credits Bruno Latour with the introduction of the category of non-humans to anthropology for the study of science, but proposes a re-definition, arguing that: ‘The distinction Latour makes between humans and nonhumans, however, fails to recognize that some nonhumans are selves’ (2007: 5).

Kohn proposes an ‘anthropology beyond the human’, which envisions the human world and the natural world together, ‘understood as integral, though not interchangeable, parts of a single, open-ended story’ (Kohn 2013: 9). He distinguishes non-human ‘selves’ from artifacts and argues that ‘what we share with jaguars and other living selves – whether bacterial, floral, fungal, or animal – is the fact that how we represent the world around us is in some way or another constitutive of our being’ (Kohn 2013:6). Kohn considers non-human entities

in Nature as other kinds of selves and has presented the concept of an ‘ecology of selves’, referring to a multitude of selves in the forest (Kohn 2013). In keeping with Kohn’s approach, my approach recognises that some non-humans are indeed selves, meaning that they are living beings that exist in relation with other entities. I prefer the use of the word ‘beings’, ‘entities’ or ‘spirits’ more specifically within my research, as amongst my research participants ‘selves’ denotes various different meanings including opposite ones (of ego or personal self vs. spirit or universal self) and would thus be confusing terminology. My approach is in line with some recent approaches across anthropology and the natural sciences that challenge readers’ ontological frameworks by considering non-human beings in Nature in anthropomorphic terms, including Kohn’s *How Forests Think* (Kohn 2013) as well as *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s Eye View of the World* (Pollan 2002), and *Plants as Persons* (Hall 2011), for example. This approach, as Kohn and others have indicated (Kohn 2015; Povinelli 2016; Lagrou 2018) can be understood as reflecting wider concerns about the impending ecological crisis and the damaging effects of the Anthropocene.

Rage Against the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is defined as the current geological epoch in which human activity has become the major influence upon environment and climate, and in which humanity has begun to dominate the natural world, rather than coexist with it (Sayre, 2012: 58). The imagined separation between humankind and nature imposed and sustained by countless years of anthropocentric civilisation has proven to be an arbitrary distinction that dissolves upon the unquestionable realisation of an interrelated world of symbiosis between different species and the Earth itself. As Eduardo Kohn has argued, ‘attending to the so-called Anthropocene - an epoch in which human and nonhuman kinds and futures have become so increasingly entangled that ethical and political problems can no longer be treated as exclusively human problems...requires new conceptual tools, something that a non- reductionistic,

ethnographically inspired, ontological anthropology may be in a privileged position to provide' (Kohn 2015).

Indeed, in recent years we have seen the proliferation and popularisation of ontologically orientated anthropology spanning different geographical and topical foci, which can be understood as a response to current ecological concerns (e.g. Wagner 1986; Ingold 1990; Descola 2013). As well as representing, as it always has, some of the world's most marginalised peoples in the 'undeveloped world' who are the most badly affected by the ecological crisis (Povinelli 2016), anthropology has also contributed alternative perspectives on humankind's relationship with the natural world that challenge rationalist-materialist viewpoints by bringing nature to life. *Beyond Anthropology*, MJ. Barrett's animistic approach to environmental research, allowing for cross-species communication, has gained popularity and influence across disciplines (Barrett 2011).

Deep Ecology, a school of thought which emerged in the 1970s has also been influential (Naess and Sessions 1984), giving way to 'spiritual ecology' more recently (Sponsel 2012). Reflecting increasing concerns about environmental crisis, these approaches criticise anthropocentric domination and promote eco-spiritual concerns that highlight the importance of the inherent inter-connectedness and equality between human beings and other life forms on Earth (Naess and Sessions 1984). Indeed, deep ecologists have argued that human survival depends on the sanctification of nature (Fox 1984; Sjöö & Mor 1991). Research has shown how the principles of deep ecology are reflected in contemporary ayahuasca discourse evidenced by online forums (Baker 2015). The emergent field of ecopsychology conveys similar perspectives (Greenway 1995) and its principles have also been connected with Amazonian plant shamanism.

Inspired by *Plants as Persons* (Hall 2011) and drawing on her experiences working with plant shamans, eco-psychologist Monica Gagliano has argued that the hierarchical structure that Western science imposes on the natural world, which grants humans superiority over other living species and places plants at the bottom of the ‘pyramid of life’, is the root cause of the current environmental crisis. She suggests the solution lies in changing, or perhaps even completely reversing this perspective (Gagliano 2013). Similarly, it has been suggested by some ayahuasca scholars that the *reversal* of Mankind’s destructive attitude towards Nature, such as is enabled by ayahuasca experiences, is a potential route through which we may achieve redemption (Metzner 1999) and so the spread of ayahuasca use could act as an antidote to the socially and environmentally destructive growth of capitalist society (Tupper 2016; Harms 2021).

The growth of countercultural intellectual and social movements encompassing environmental and spiritual concerns can be seen in part as a response in defiance against the impact of the ‘Anthropocene’. Commenting on the ‘spiritual revolution’, Heelas, Woodhead et al. indicate that the sanctification of psychedelics is a key feature of these movements that is closely connected with the sanctification of nature and the revival of pagan and shamanic perspectives and practices. This revival, sometimes referred to as the ‘Shamanic Renaissance’, involves a critique of Christianity, which is considered within these circles as being responsible for encouraging the domineering attitude towards Nature that is underlying the current environmental crisis (Heelas, Woodhead et. al. 2005). These sentiments are expressed through the narratives of many Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism, as explored throughout this dissertation.

As the preceding discussion has shown, an ontological approach to research that represents the perspectives of insiders by acknowledging the agency of non-human entities within ayahuasca shamanism is appropriate. Els Lagrou has indicated that ‘the need for a new

relational (cosmo)politics, where humans and nonhumans are not opposed but interdependent, is partially responsible for a renewed interest in Amerindian ethnology by other disciplines and beyond academic circles. This situation is reminiscent of other historical moments when Amazonia also spoke to the imagination of the world as a source of alternative solutions for humanity' (2018: 154). The popularisation of Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism can also be understood in this light.

Amerindian Perspectivism

Amerindian anthropology has made critical contributions to the development of 'the ontological turn' (Holbraad et. al. 2017) within anthropology and related disciplines and has provided ample ethnological material and theoretical contributions that have influence across disciplines.

Inviting us to take seriously the perspective of 'the other', Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism* (1998) has exceedingly made the most influential theoretical contributions from Amazonian anthropology, and indeed earned him the title of "the father of the ontological turn" (Holbraad et. al. 2017). Basing his theoretical framework on extensive comparative reading of Amerindian ethnologies and mythologies, and on his own work among the Araweté people of Brazilian Amazonia (1992), Viveiros de Castro describes an Amerindian cosmology filled with multiple subjective selves or persons, both human and nonhuman, all having a common kind of soul but different corporality, all seeing themselves and their own species as human and experiencing their different worlds from their own perspective, as in the famous example of the jaguar seeing blood as manioc beer (1998:470). Subverting the categories of scientific-rationalism, Amerindian perspectivism is based on the presupposing of 'a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity' (*ibid*: 470) and proposes 'multinaturalism' and 'monoculturalism' in place of

‘mononaturalism’ and ‘multiculturalism’. According to Viveiros de Castro, the body is the site of perspectival differentiation within Amerindian perspectivism and thus a shaman has the power to change species perspective and transform into spirits or animals through the wearing of masks and other costumes or props (*ibid*: 482).

Amerindian perspectivism has received criticism for its generalising of Amazonian cosmologies and cultures (Turner 2009), for being too static (Rasmussen 2011), for ignoring gender (Rival 2005) and for its all-too-neat reversal of the categories of Nature/Culture (Ramos 2012). Yet, I would suggest, Amerindian perspectivism’s ontological challenge to the dichotomy of Nature/Culture and to the presumed distinctions that materialist perspectives draw between humans and non-humans, remains its great contribution to anthropological thought. As discussed throughout the Lowland South American literature and this dissertation distinctions between human and non-human entities and realms become blurred within the relational field of ayahuasca shamanism involving multiple beings, which are all considered selves capable of having agency. Yet, while most of the now classical literature on perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Lima 1999; Vilaça 2005, Fausto 2007 (although called ‘familiarisation’) is about animals, my research focuses on relations with plant entities. Perspectivism in relation to ayahuasca and shamanism has been discussed by Lowland South Americanist scholars as one aspect of broader notions of Amazonian ontologies (Peluso 2004, 2007, 2014; Rosengren 2006, 2015; Langdon and Santana de Rose 2012; Gearin et al 2021) whereas in this thesis I raise it in the local context of Iquitos among *vegetalistas*.

Philippe Descola suggests that perspectivism is a subset of animism (Descola 2013). His work has also been influential in opposing the ‘Nature/Culture binary’. *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013) is Descola’s affront to Euro-American naturalism, which he argues is an ethnocentric perspective that should not be applied to societies universally, as it has been, but

is rather the result of historical processes that have separated the human world of Culture from the non-human world of Nature in the minds and lives of Western people (Descola 2013). In place of the Nature/Culture binary as a basis for anthropological inquiry, Descola distinguishes between four different ontologies that he argues provide the ontological framework for the variety of social life across the world, although are not mutually exclusive in some cases: (1) animism, whereby human and non-human beings are understood to have similar interiorities to one another, but different corporalities; (2) naturalism, where all beings are essentially made of the same material but are radically different in terms of their internal lives; (3) totemism, whereby there is continuity between interiority and physicality across human and non-human beings; and (4) analogism, which supposes radical difference on the internal and physical level. My research engages with animistic ontological perspectives of human and non-human beings as exhibited within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and addresses ontological perspectives amongst Western research participants, largely provoked by participation in ayahuasca shamanism and related practices.

There has been a tendency within anthropological thought to deny the existence of dualism within Amazonian cosmologies in contrasting them with Western duality. Andrew Russell cautions against this approach, arguing that ‘such dualisms, as Lévi-Strauss demonstrates so magisterially in *Mythologiques*, are alive and well, embedded in indigenous thought processes throughout North and South America’ (Russell 2019: 37 citing Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1966). He points to evidence within Amerindian ethnographies that suggest that despite the recent anthropological reluctance to acknowledging dualisms at play within Amerindian societies, dualities, whatever their contents, are indeed to be found within Amerindian cosmologies (Russell 2019 referencing Stolze Lima 1999; Turner 2009; De Castro 2012). As Russell suggests (2019:40), considering ayahuasca like tobacco as an entity in its relational capacity is a worthwhile route through which to engage with the negotiation of dualisms

within Amerindian cosmologies. Other Amazonian scholars suggest that the presence of dualisms within indigenous ontologies are symptomatic of indigenous relationships with western ideas¹⁶, a perspective I agree with, which is clearly relevant to mestizo cosmology. Focusing on gender and cosmology, my analysis interrogates how dualisms and the relationship between dualistic poles are conceptualised and interpreted by different actors in the field of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos.

Shamanic traditions and practices and their study have played a significant role in the ontological movement with its increasing interest in non-human entities, to which/whom Amerindian and Siberian peoples with long shamanic traditions typically ascribe personhood, agency and intentionality (Brightman & Ulturgasheva 2012). Furthermore, the transformational capabilities of shamans themselves to become non-human beings such as jaguars within these cultures has been widely recorded (e.g. Riviere 1994; Costa 2007; High in Brightman & Ulturgasheva 2012: 130-146). The comparative collection of essays, *Animism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia* (Brightman & Ulturgasheva 2012) explores how shamanic cosmologies and cultures evolve through transformational processes that occur in 'relational spaces', such as environmental changes, migration or religious conversion. My research represents one example of this a period of transformation of ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region through the influx of Western participants, highlighting how 'Mother Ayahuasca' has come into prominence, with an increased focus on healing commercialisation for Western clientele entails, and recording the impact of Eastern spirituality and philosophy also on perspectives of 'dark' and 'light'. It also highlights how gender dynamics and cosmology has changed over time, with women gaining more access to shamanic knowledge through *dieta* with plant entities due to changes in traditional practices related to urbanisation

¹⁶ Personal communication with Daniela Peluso.

and Westernisation , and in part , as a response to growing incidences of sexual abuse of female participants as shamanic warfare over power, money and women between male shamanic practitioners rages behind the backdrop of a spiritual healing industry.

Calling for the ‘decolonizing’ of ayahuasca research, which has tended to marginalise indigenous knowledge by maintaining ethnocentric approaches and perspectives, Laura Dev has argued that multispecies communication is at the heart of indigenous knowledge creation and should therefore be treated as of primary importance within ethnographies focusing on Amazonian shamanism and ayahuasca (Dev 2018). The cultivation of relationships with ayahuasca and other spiritual entities is central to the narratives of ayahuasca drinkers (Kjellgren et. al. 2009; Krippner & Sulla 2011). Indeed, anthropological research shows that these spiritual encounters during ayahuasca rituals are recognised as the axis for healing in multicultural contexts (Luna 2017; Sanabria 2017). Thus, I have placed human/plant relations at the heart of my ethnography, as they constitute the core of the narratives of my research participants and indeed, the practice of Peruvian *vegetalismo* (Beyer 2009).

Relationships between *vegetalistas* and the spirits of rainforest plants form the basis of *vegetalismo* practice (Luna 1986; Dobkin de Rios 1992; Beyer 2009). As his title suggests, Stephen Beyer’s *Singing to the Plants* (2009) is especially focused on the centrality of relations with plant spirits within the practice of mestizo *vegetalismo* and the learning of shamanic songs known as *icaros* through the practice of *dieta* (plant diets). In line with this approach, I place the formation of relations with plant spirits and the practice of *dieta* at the core of my analysis of gender and cosmology. Although one of his teachers was female, Beyer does not focus on the issue of gender in his analysis of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism.

Furthermore, while he is critical of ‘ayahuasca tourism’, Beyer does not engage with developments of practice within this context.

Thus, unlike forementioned works on mestizo *vegetalismo*, this dissertation focuses on developments of practice relating to the negotiation of inter-species relationships that have taken place within the context of the rise of the ayahuasca industry in the Iquitos region, focusing on gender.

Gender and Sexuality

Amazonian ethnographies have long covered gender relations as part of an overall exploration of Amazonian groups and communities.¹⁷ Yet, its greater centrality as an organising principle and driving force of Amazonian social life and processes has been emphasized by some scholars (e.g. Belaunde 1994; 2006; McCallum 2001). Gender is not only a lens to examine gender complementarity and biases, but it is also an angle from which to explore human/non-human relations and wider issues and controversies in the field of ayahuasca shamanism, within which gender, and sexuality, are underexplored issues.

There was a lack of attention given to gender and sexuality within the ontological turn even with its engagement with Indigenous philosophical forms (onto-epistemologies) (Belaunde and McCallum 2023). Rival (2005) indicates that Amerindian perspectivism fails to account for the significance of sex and gender differences. She argues, drawing on ethnographic evidence with the Huaorani, that sex and gender differences are significant in the formation of Amazonian theories of personhood and embodiment. Scholars such as Lima (2005), Lagrou (2007), Otero dos Santos (2019), and Matos (2019) have proposed the concept of gender perspectivism whereby gender, as a relation of difference influences the formation of other relations of difference as between humans and nonhumans. Also highlighting the

¹⁷ See Peluso 2003 and 2021 for a review of the literature on gender in Lowland South America.

importance of gender within the formation of relations between humans and non-humans, Belaunde and McCallum emphasise the importance of blood within Amazonian cosmology and sociality, being gendered and containing knowledge, and especially the powers and dangers of menstrual blood, which must be managed for successful engagement with other cosmological beings to occur (Belaunde and McCallum 2018). These considerations are applicable to shamanic initiation and *dieta* practices as this dissertation explores.

My work also draws directly upon some of the essays in Gregor and Tuzin's comparative exploration of gender in Amazonia and Melanesia (2001), which designates gender as the most 'powerfully integrative topic' (2001:7) for comparison across Amazonia and Melanesia, and as a subject of great interest to the human condition that intersects many disciplines.

Much of this volume is devoted to analysis of male initiation rites and men's cults, in which men's ritual activities can be seen to mirror female reproductive powers (Bonnemère, Chapter 2; Biersack, Chapter 4; Conklin, Chapter 7; Hugh-Jones, Chapter 11; Gregor and Tuzin, Chapter 13), a theme that is applicable to male-orientated shamanic *dieta* practice, as suggested by Barbira-Freedman (2010) and as I address in Chapter Four. My exploration of the gender bias amongst practitioners in Chapter Four also draws on Perruchon (2003) who connects the gender bias with the impacts of patriarchy, and challenges Colpron (2005) who has suggested that the gender bias in the literature is resultant of biases within the anthropological field.

Marylin Strathern's *Gender of the Gift* (1988) presented a significant challenge to male biased perspectives in Anthropology highlighting the relevance of gender within non-human realms of study and presenting gender rather as a form of becoming through relation whereby 'the singular person, then, regarded as a derivative of multiple identities, may be transformed into the individual composed of distinct male and female elements' (1988: 15). Similarly, Ecofeminist critiques of deep ecology, an environmental philosophy which views all living

beings as equal and conceives of the natural environment as a living organism (Naess and Sessions 1984), suggest that the focus on the transpersonal obscures sociocultural dynamics including gender issues (Cheney 1987; Warren 1996; Plumwood 2002).

My research includes Ecofeminist perspectives, which perceive the relationship between Mankind and Nature as gendered and the rise of Patriarchal social systems as connected with the subjugation of women and ‘Mother Earth.’ (e.g. D’Eaubonne 1974; Merchant 1980; Plumwood 1993; Miles & Shiva 1993; Shiva 2020a). Ecofeminists emphasise that the planet is a *living* being and argue that Patriarchy focused on the ‘Mastery of Nature’ is built upon the assumption that the Earth is dead (Plumwood 1993; Shiva 2020a, 2020b). These perspectives are similar to those of Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism and are connected with the rise of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ in Western discourse on ayahuasca and Westernized settings such as touristic ones in Iquitos, as this dissertation explores.

One of the earliest and most influential works to present the hypothesis that the subjugation of women in society across cultures is akin to the oppression of Nature was anthropologist Sherry Ortner in her seminal article ‘*Is female to male as nature is to culture?*’ (1972) in which she proposed that the association of female with Nature and male with Culture is evident cross-culturally, alongside the subjugation of women. Her theory was challenged by feminist scholars for essentializing gender. She was also challenged by Amazonian anthropologists, most notably by Joanna Overing’s ‘*Men control women? The ‘Catch 22’ in the analysis of gender*’ (1986), who pointed to the bias of the Western gaze and highlighted the presence of equality between the sexes in some Amazonian communities despite the existence of gendered domains. Yet romanticised perceptions of Amazonians living in harmony have contributed to Western participants’ perceptions of Amazonia and ayahuasca culture, and to problems connected with this romanticism, as this dissertation explores, highlighting sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca contexts.

My research engages with ecofeminist and gender debates through its appraisal of contradictory perceptions of the figure of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ at the centre of contemporary ayahuasca culture, highlighting the significance of fixed gendered characterisations of Nature and Culture amongst ayahuasca’s Western clientele, and arguing that such perceptions of have been commodified by the commercial ayahuasca industry. Furthermore, this dissertation contains a critique of ecofeminism through its challenge to fixed gendered characterisations of Nature/Culture represented by mestizo and insider perceptions of ayahuasca as an ambiguous substance and spirit exhibiting dynamic dualities. Its focus on *brujería* and the problem of sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts calls attention to ayahuasca’s ‘negative’ potentialities and enables analysis of varied cultural moralities surrounding sexuality. By sexuality I am referring to sexual behaviour as the broader topic of ‘sexuality’ (for example, one’s orientation(s)) encompasses subject matter that goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

Mead (1928) and Malinowski (1929) laid the foundations in Anthropology for cross-cultural analysis of sexual behaviour. Their analysis of sexual behaviour in Samoa and the Trobriand Islands respectively caused their Western audiences to consider that sexual behaviour is governed by culturally orientated moral codes, which as their work highlighted, are varied and diverse across cultures. Herdt’s research among the Sambia people of Papua New Guinea (1994, 2014) focusing on rituals of manhood and sexual development phases among males from homosexual practice in adolescence to heterosexuality in adulthood, has also been influential in this regard. Considerations of the cultural specificity of sexual behaviour and related moralities are vital to my analysis of sexual relations between shaman and patient and the incongruencies that exist between mestizo and Western perspectives of gender and behavioural norms, power dynamics and codes of conduct in ayahuasca healing contexts.

My work contains a nod to the tradition within anthropology exemplified by Mead (1928) of using cross-cultural comparison to highlight issues in Western society. While the post-

modern movement in anthropology and beyond cautions against making generalisations, the social and cultural reflections that anthropological research enables remain at the pinnacle of its contribution to society, I would argue. These reflections are the core of the anthropological fieldwork experience and of great potential intrigue and influence for a wider audience. Furthermore, these considerations have specific relevance within the context of research addressing counter-culturally inspired engagement in cross-cultural practice, as we see in the case of Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism. Yet my argument challenges Westerners' perceptions of 'otherness' in this context, showing rather that these perceptions often reflect their own counter-cultural, eco-feminist inspired concerns. It therefore contains a challenge to eco-feminist perspectives. I propose that this enables a reflection on and interrogation of perceptions of gender differences reflected within Western social systems and movements. I argue that mestizo Amazonian understandings of gender and its dynamic relationship with cosmological dualisms, present a challenge to typical Western lay perceptions of gender as being fixed and furthermore, in relations of superiority and inferiority, as both Patriarchy and its counter- movements can be seen to convey, showing preference for either 'male' or 'female' qualities. Rather, Amazonian perspectives contained within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, embrace a re-thinking of gendered dualism as being dynamic and equal, with both male and female qualities containing both 'light' and 'dark' elements.

Apprenticeship

Shamanic apprenticeship is a method with a long pedigree in ethnographic research with native healers (Castaneda 1968, Harner 1980, Luna 1986, Desjarlais 1992, Beyer 2009), recognised as an ideal way of coming to an understanding of different epistemological and ontological realities. Apprenticeship is also a well - established method of research in anthropological fieldwork more widely, which has been used in diverse craft -orientated

studies including that of weavers (e.g. Aronson 1982, Dilley 1984), tailors (e.g. Lave 1977), woodworkers (e.g. Cooper 1980), potters (e.g. Bunzel 1929), blacksmiths (e.g. Coy 1982), dancers (e.g. Downey 2005), hairdressers (e.g. Jacobs-Huey 2003), as well as healers.

Apprenticeship makes the process of enculturation inherent in anthropological fieldwork clear, as the anthropologist moves from a position of ineptitude to greater proficiency. It also encourages greater reflexivity as the anthropologist becomes the object of scrutiny by the community and most notably, their teachers (Desjarlais 1992, Downey, Dalidowicz & Mason 2015).

As Jean Lave, a leading apprentice - anthropologist and educational theorist has argued, in these 'communities of practice' apprenticeship is the most suitable form of research providing access to insider forms of knowledge and culture-specific ways of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). Becoming an apprentice is an ideal way to gain access into a field as this gives the anthropologist a meaningful role in communities in which apprenticeship is familiar. In fact, as some apprentice-anthropologists have suggested, an anthropologist may have little choice but to become an apprentice in order to gain access to these communities and to 'insider' knowledge (Downey, Dalidowicz & Mason 2015), as was true in my case.

Michael Coy (1989: 3-4) argues that learning to manage the social relationships involved with apprenticeship is as important as learning the practical skills. The most important relationship to manage for any apprentice is with their teacher. In a reversal of the usual power relations between researcher and researched, apprentice anthropologists are inescapably dependent on their teachers for access to knowledge, and ever deeper levels of understanding that can only be achieved through practice.

Chapter Two: The *Gringa* Apprentice – Fieldwork and Methodology

This chapter provides the backdrop for this dissertation, recalling the story of my entry into the field of ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos, and tracking the development of this research project from its initiation in 2014 to its final completion in 2023. I describe methodological approach and research methods, introduce key characters in the research who feature throughout, address how I negotiated my changing and overlapping roles in the field of centre facilitator, researcher and community activist, and explain how the focus of this dissertation on gender and cosmology emerged.

The Research Journey: From Ayahuasca Novice to Ayahuasca Community Activist

My research journey is indivisible from my personal journey into ayahuasca shamanism. Like most of my Western research participants, it was a personal quest fuelled by a desire for healing, adventure, and spiritual exploration that initially led me to Iquitos and ayahuasca, and which continued to motivate me during fieldwork. My fieldwork officially began in August 2017 but by this time I had already lived and worked in the Iquitos region for about three years. Initial encounters with ayahuasca led to prolonged work establishing and running an ayahuasca healing centre in the riverside mestizo town of Jenaro Herrera with local *ayahuasquero* Don Luco and his family.

Chinchelejo Lodge (Dragonfly Lodge) is the family home of Don Luco Navarro as well as an ayahuasca centre since 2005 for foreign visitors (referred to as *pasajeros* locally, literally ‘passengers’, presumably because they arrive by plane). I lived and worked with Don Luco at *Chinchelejo Lodge* in Jenaro Herrera as his apprentice, centre manager and ayahuasca retreat facilitator for almost three years beginning in 2015 with frequent travel to the city of Iquitos. Naturally, this experience and the process of socialisation and enculturation it involved

greatly informed my research and its methodology, which, as I will explain, was shaped partly by the ethos of community insiders.

I write as an insider who, like many of my research participants and fellow anthropologists who have done fieldwork in Iquitos (Evengia Fotiou 2005 - 10; Silvia Mesturini Cappelletti 2010/2014), has gradually moved from the periphery of the ayahuasca community to a more centralised position (Mesturini Cappelletti 2018). An 'insider' within the Iquitos context according to my understanding and meaning is one who is experienced in ayahuasca practice within local as well as touristic contexts and has acquired a role either within the ayahuasca industry there as a centre owner, worker, and/or shamanic apprentice, or otherwise engages regularly in ayahuasca ceremonies in the region. Becoming an insider also entails becoming familiar with the 'dark' side of shamanic practices in the region, namely *brujería*, shamanic rivalries over money and power, and sexual and psychological abuse. I gradually became an insider in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos from the point at which I began working with Don Luco in 2015 onwards.

After working with Don Luco, I based myself largely in Iquitos since 2018 onwards. I engaged with several other *ayahuasqueros* in the region during my fieldwork, including El Maestro, El Espiritista and his English apprentice, and urban *ayahuasqueros* Don Luis, Don Orlando, Don Pedro and La Doctora, as I refer to them throughout this dissertation. I decided to anonymize all research participants in the interest of protecting their identities, apart from those who are publicly connected with me and therefore easily traceable, namely Don Luco and his son Jolker; and those who spoke in a public arena during my research, such as Don Ricardo Amaringo, or are publicly known and with whom I had little contact, such as Don Augustin Rivas. I use only first names in reference to Don Luis, Don Orlando and also Don Pedro, names that are reasonably common, making them less traceable; and use titles rather than names for El Maestro, El Espiritista and La Doctora to protect their identity and those

connected with them for reasons of my own relating to occurrences during research, or at their request. I will introduce the key *ayahuasqueros* in my research as they arise throughout the research journey below.

My experience in the field thus entailed running a retreat centre with a local *ayahuasquero*, being a retreat facilitator in another touristic centre on the edge of Iquitos and leading a community initiative to combat sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts as a representative of *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Medicines* (Chacruna 2019). This personal journey from naïve traveller to local resident, involving the embodiment of various roles including shamanic apprentice, healing centre facilitator, and community activist, forms the backdrop of my research.

Entering the Field

I first travelled to Iquitos during the summer of 2014 to take part in ayahuasca ceremonies through volunteering in one of the many ‘ayahuasca centres’ in the region. Like many foreign travellers there, I was initially surprised to find myself in a bustling city rather than the quiet jungle shack town I had naively imagined when planning my trip. I had done relatively little research prior to my travels and held unrealistically romantic ideas about Amazonia and ayahuasca. Ayahuasca had been my primary motivation for a 5 - month trip of travel and volunteering in Peru. Having first heard about it five years previously through an ex-boyfriend and a book he had lent me called *Breaking Open the Head* by Daniel Pinchbeck (Pinchbeck 2002), I wanted to drink ayahuasca in the interest of personal healing and to fulfil a long-standing curiosity about this seemingly magical plant medicine. I had arranged to work in an ayahuasca centre through a volunteering website and had every intention of staying one month there, doing a couple of ceremonies during my stay, and then going to Colombia for a few weeks before heading home. Little did I know that seven years later I

would still not have been to Colombia and would be living between Iquitos and England finishing my anthropology doctorate on ayahuasca shamanism having worked with *ayahuasqueros* and studied ayahuasca practices ever since these first encounters.

Considering the lack of formal planning, I was very lucky to find myself in one of the most beautiful ayahuasca centres in the region, owned and run by an American-Mexican man, set in lush primary rainforest with good eco - friendly facilities, a beautiful *maloca* (ceremonial house), and an individual *tambo* (individual wooden hut) for each guest or volunteer. I would stay in this centre as a volunteer for one month initially, and another month approximately two months later, with the main responsibility of cooking meals for the guests according to the prescribed 'ayahuasca diet' rules for retreat participants there. This involved excluding salt, sugar (apart from fruit), red meat, chilli and all other flavourings apart from dry herbs and lemon. The modern 'ayahuasca diet' used in ayahuasca centres is adapted from the local tradition of plant *dietas* (Luna 1986; Beyer 2009), a key aspect of practice within *vegetalismo* shamanism that I will address in greater detail in the following chapter. As I intended to partake in ayahuasca ceremonies I was also required to follow this diet for at least a week previously as well as following my time there.

At the request of the centre owner and as is usual practice in the region, I had filled out a retreat participant questionnaire covering my medical and drug use history and intentions with "the medicine" as ayahuasca was referred in this communication. Having been accepted as a volunteer and participant I was able to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies for \$50 to begin with and ceremonies were free for me after the first couple of weeks. Some centres provide free ceremonies for volunteers from the start and others dictate that people must come as a paying guest for a full retreat before acquiring a voluntary position.

I remember my surprise when Don Luco first arrived at the centre the afternoon before the night of my first ceremony wearing shorts and a baseball cap and carrying a small rucksack on his back. I had expected a man in a cloak with a feather crown on his head, but the stupidity and naivety of my expectations were immediately apparent.



Figure 10: Don 'Luco' (Eleuterio) Navarro Java

This was 2014 and we were not even in the remote jungle but a 45 - minute bus ride from a bustling trading city. Yet my expectations were typical of visiting ayahuasca virgins. I would watch many travellers go through the same double take and self -ridiculing process over the coming years during which I worked with Don Luco. In a particularly memorable instance, a retreat participant asked Don Luco and I, “Where is the shaman?” on their first day at the centre, having spent the entire morning with him. This comical and quite common motif of cross-cultural interaction in the region is a striking example of Westerners’ naïve misconceptions of the figure of the ‘shaman’ and local culture.

Don Eleuterio Navarro Java

Don 'Luco' or 'Eloy' as he is also known, was a mestizo *vegetalista* and *ayahuasquero* in his 40s at the time of my research. He is from Jenaro Herrera where he was born in 1968 to parents from nearby towns in the Upper Amazon Basin. Luco's grandparents were shamans, his grandfather from Brazil and his grandmother from Ecuador. Luco's mother died when he was just 2 years old and he went to live with his sister until he was 10 and then his brother in Aucaya, a nearby town. Along with El Maestro, and his brother, they all drank ayahuasca with an *ayahuasquero* from Pucallpa, a Master *vegetalista* and *ayahuasquero* who lived in the same town. Luco first drank ayahuasca when he was fifteen. Although his father practiced shamanism, Luco learned shamanic practice from his brother and El Maestro as well as the Master shaman with whom they apprenticed. Luco was told when he was quite young by this Master shaman that one day he would work with many *gringos*. It was not until he was 36 years old that he properly committed to the path of *vegetalismo* following the unexpected death of his brother. This was a traumatic event for Don Luco which led him into a dark depression at the time. El Maestro helped him out of this phase convincing him to undergo a *dieta* with him in the forest. Don Luco worked under El Maestro at a famous ayahuasca centre in the Iquitos region, before opening his own lodge with his Western partner at the time in 2005, which functioned for five years bringing many groups of American *pasajeros*. He later went to work at another ayahuasca centre in the area, the one where I first met him, before we re-opened his own lodge in 2015, which we ran together for two and a half years. Outside of shamanic practice he is a competent hunter and fisherman, loving father of six children, and devoted partner to his spouse Lili. It is useful to note that Don Luco's demeanor and beliefs are not typical of mestizo shamans in the region. His exposure to Westerners from early on in his shamanic practice might in part explain this.

As a centre owner or facilitator, one is constantly engaged in negotiating between these misconceptions and the reality of life and practice in the locality. Mestizo shamans also want to be properly represented and usually take pride in their culture, being non - indigenous, wearing 'Western' clothing for example, having access to modern technology, aspects of their lifestyle that seem in conflict with Westerners' romanticised perceptions of rainforest community life. The first Westerner to ever visit our centre during the time we were preparing it for retreats told me I must make the place look "more authentic" - by hanging Shipibo tapestries and using wooden plates and cups, for example. Most Western participants in retreats at Don Luco's centre though, were happy to have their misconceptions shattered, as mine had been. However, we generally attracted clientele who were open to a more rustic

and genuinely authentic experience than many Westerners are. Some larger centres more removed from local life challenge participants' misconceptions less, or often even feed them.

My First Ayahuasca Ceremony

My first ayahuasca ceremony took place in a large *maloca* in the forest of the retreat centre grounds. Don Luco was positioned at the back of the *maloca* on a rocking chair facing the rest of the space where beds were laid out for participants, in this case just three: me, a paying guest and the retreat owner. In front of Don Luco lay an ornate sheet upon which crystals were laid along with a glass bottle of ayahuasca, *agua florida* (floral water used for cleansing), *mapacho* (tobacco (*nicotina rustica*) cigarettes), an ash tray, *chakapa* (shamanic leaf instrument) and various perfumes. This *maloca* could hold up to twelve people, a usual size. Some in the region hold only eight and others hold more than twenty ceremonial participants. Participants usually lie on mattresses during the ceremony or sit on chairs depending on the instructions of ceremonial leaders and organisers and personal preferences.

The ceremony began after nightfall at around 8pm, as is also usual in touristic centres (as opposed to 10pm in local settings). It began with Don Luco blessing the ayahuasca with a prayer spoken into the bottle in a low whisper and then giving each participant a small portion in the shared ceremonial cup (the owner did not drink), which he blessed individually with a song that I later learned was a kind of *icaro* (shamanic medicine song). We had been instructed beforehand to focus on our intentions when we took the cup of ayahuasca and say *salud* ('health' meaning 'to good health' or 'cheers') when we drank. Then we laid back on our mattresses and allowed the ceremony to commence and 'the medicine' to take effect as Don Luco guided the ceremony with the singing of *icaros* and the shaking of his *chakapa* throughout. It lasted approximately three and ½ hours.

As seems true of almost anybody who has ever drunk ayahuasca, my first experience was not what I had expected. I had read about glorious psychedelic visions and adventures in alternate dimensions and was also ready for copious amounts of “purging” – mainly vomiting – which I believed, based on what I had read and been told, would relieve me of my emotional baggage and leave me feeling healed and elated. Instead, having drunk the foul-tasting liquid and laid back on my mattress in the *maloca* filled with expectation, I felt nothing for several hours. At first, I was happy listening to Don Luco sing his *icaros* and play his *chakapa* as I waited for the ayahuasca to take hold, but gradually I began to feel disappointed with the lack of noticeable effects. About an hour in I asked for another cup and laid back down. Still nothing as I listened jealously to my fellow participant vomiting profusely, and kept asking in my head, “*where are the visions?*”, until finally Don Luco’s *icaros* subsided, and it was clear the ceremony was coming to a close as he and the other participant began to rest. It was only then as I lay there in the pitch dark and quiet of the evening forest that I felt the effects of the ayahuasca rush over me. I saw an ugly and quite frightening vision of what I perceived to be spirits cleaning my insides (my intestines?). They were looking at me with angry and disgusted expressions.

Having hoped and asked for visions throughout, the phrase “*Be careful what you wish for*” came to mind. To my relief the vision subsided, and I was able to sleep. I remember distinctly telling the owner of the centre the following day, “*I don’t think ayahuasca is for me.*” That day I decided not to drink again but to finish my volunteering and move on. Gladly he and Don Luco convinced me otherwise.

A crucial part of that conversation with the centre owner for me was when he said to me, “*You’re a fighter*”, in relation to my lack of visionary and purging experiences during that first ceremony. It was not something that had occurred to me, but planted the seed that

perhaps there were parts of me ‘fighting off’ or resisting the effects of the ayahuasca, the benefits of which might be felt if I were to relax my resistance.

Later that day, Don Luco spoke to me in the kitchen whilst I was preparing lunch for the people at the centre as usual. It first struck me that I could understand him quite easily, despite my Spanish at this time being quite basic. More significantly, without me having said anything at all to him about my reasons for being there or having revealed very much to the centre owner either, Don Luco said things to me that revealed he somehow understood aspects of my life, character, and things that needed healing within me, that seemed even beyond my own understanding at the time but resonated greatly. Truth be told, I was a little frightened by this, but at the same time intrigued to drink ayahuasca with him again, as this suggested he might be able to help me.

The ceremonies that followed that week were not particularly extraordinary or visionary, but I had several key insights and experiences, including one in which I was surrounded by a ‘bubble’ of pink energy and felt completely safe and engulfed in love, a feeling which I could not remember having felt before. I wanted to know more and expressed my interest to Don Luco in conversation between ceremonies.

Initiation

I was somewhat unwittingly initiated as an apprentice due to what I believed at the time to be a misunderstanding between Don Luco and me, which exemplified our then very different understandings of Amazonian shamanic knowledge. I was asking Don Luco one day about the possibility of making some plant medicine for my grandad who had been recently diagnosed with diabetes and cancer, and I expressed an interest also in learning about different plants and their medicinal usages. Don Luco invited me to visit him at his own

centre and family home following the retreat to undergo a plant *dieta* and to make my grandad's medicine, an offer I could not refuse.

So, three weeks after my first ayahuasca ceremony and five ayahuasca ceremonies later, I was 15 hours downriver from Iquitos and 4 hours deep in the jungle from Don Luco's home - town of Jenaro Herrera doing my first shamanic plant *dieta* with him, his son, his brother, another local man, and two French male travellers. We drank a mixture of medicinal plants throughout each day, and ayahuasca outside in the forest almost every night, ate plantain and fish cooked over a fire, and slept under a tarpaulin. Despite the incessant mosquito bites, I felt happy and at home. Ayahuasca ceremonies at this stage and in this setting were also much more powerful than I had yet experienced. During one ceremony I had my first 3D, full colour visionary experience. Don Luco was by my side physically singing and I saw several spirits above me smiling that I felt he was introducing me to, and whom I instinctively took to be the spirits of shamans (who had passed or in other realms). This was probably the point at which I really knew I wanted to stay and learn more.

Issues associated with being a woman in this setting surfaced when a local man who referred to himself as a '*maestro*' tried to kiss me and made sexual advances towards me, acting completely against *dieta* rules.¹⁸ I was completely shocked by this but blamed myself, presuming I had given him the wrong impression. My naivety about the extent of sexual harassment and abuse in ayahuasca contexts, as well as other darker elements of the practice, continued for some time. In Chapter Seven I address the issue of sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts including how my awareness and collective awareness around the issue has developed in recent years. This incident did not dissuade me from continuing my journey. In

¹⁸ It is worth noting here that the other local men laughed at this man for referring to himself as a '*maestro*' but I was unaware of the extent to which this statement was untrue at the time.

love with ayahuasca and in love with the jungle I decided to spend the last two months of my trip staying with Don Luco and his family.

During this time, Don Luco invited me to work with him and I first had the idea for this research project, which I shared with him. We established a working agreement that would commence the following year whereby Don Luco agreed to teach me about the plants and shamanic healing in return for my help re-establishing his touristic ayahuasca centre. Before long, I realised that Don Luco was referring to me as his apprentice. Of course, from his point of view, there was no other way to learn about plants and healing. It is through undergoing an apprenticeship involving dieting with Master plants that this knowledge is acquired. Indeed, Don Luco would often argue during my research that what I could learn from the plants through this experience was far greater than the knowledge gained from reading books about shamanism, or indeed writing them.

I also became acquainted with El Maestro during this time with whom we did ceremonies along with his shamanic allies and apprentices. It felt like an honour to be included in these ceremonies, which offered me an authentic experience of doing ceremony in a local setting, in the back room of El Maestro's house with everyone seated on rocking chairs, *cumbia* (Peruvian music) blaring out in the background sometimes from the local bar and joking between El Maestro and the others throughout. Local ceremonies tend to be more jovial and certainly louder than Westernized ceremonies, with more of a celebratory feel, although with periods of more serious and focused spiritual work.

I remember being in awe of El Maestro and the level of power he clearly possessed, so was particularly felt complimented by his comment to Don Luco, that I overheard one night during the aftermath of one of these ceremonies, that I was “*very strong*”, if also a little offended at the time by the following assessment he made that I was also “*very*

complicated”, and it would not be an easy road ahead with me, but very difficult (“*no va a estar facil, va a estar muy dificil*”). In hindsight, though, he was right.

El Maestro

Maestro (teacher) refers to a Master Shaman as well as being the term used by apprentices to refer to their own teacher and is a general term of respect for experienced practitioners. ‘*El Maestro*’ is considered one of the most powerful shamans in the Iquitos region. He is from Jenaro Herrera and lives there close to *Chinchelejo* Lodge with several generations of his family in their large but quite humble home where he sometimes also holds ayahuasca ceremonies. In his 60s at the time of my fieldwork, he had over 40 years-experience as an *ayahuasquero*, *vegetalista*, *sananguero* and *tobaquero* and an impressive, wide-ranging knowledge of medicinal rainforest plants. He began learning aged eight years old when he first drank tobacco under the guidance of his grandfather, apparently to curb his laziness. He continued after his grandfather's death as an apprentice to a Master *ayahuasquero* and *vegetalista* with whom he entered into a lifetime shamanic pact. He worked at one of the most famous ayahuasca centres in the Iquitos region for twenty years until 2019 and continues to practice *curanderismo* within his local community where foreign visitors also come to drink with him quite frequently. El Maestro is more traditionally mestizo in his beliefs and practice than Don Luco, but his openness to work with *gringos* was exceptional when he began to do so during the late 1980s, acquiring a Western apprentice during the late 1990s, something he was criticised for by some local people who did not agree that shamanic knowledge should be shared with white people.

I continued to volunteer at the centre near Iquitos where I had met Don Luco during the following weeks and began making plans with him to re-open his own ayahuasca centre, while also formulating my initial research ideas. Having established both projects on my return to the UK, I would live and work with Don Luco and his family for almost three years: running the centre, supporting visitors through ayahuasca retreats and plant *dietas*, and acting as Don Luco's assistant and quasi - apprentice. My fieldwork officially began in August 2017, four months before this arrangement ended.

Fieldwork

Following 21 months of pre-fieldwork in the Iquitos region between July 2014 and October 2016, I returned to the field in August 2017 to officially begin fieldwork. Having already established an insider role in the local community and within the realm of ayahuasca shamanism in the region, I was very familiar with the field-site and was already in contact with many people who became research participants. This was a great advantage as it meant I could begin fieldwork immediately without the usual initial period of familiarisation with the chosen research setting. I was also trusted and respected by many insiders and familiar with ayahuasca and research topics, which meant research participants felt they could speak openly with me and we could explore research themes at a deeper level than would otherwise be possible. Considering my particular topic of research, I would argue it was essential to occupy an insider position in the community in order to produce worthwhile research. People in Iquitos are often suspicious of outsiders and very critical of outsider perceptions of ayahuasca, including that of academics.

My fieldwork was conducted over two years including a one - month break from the field from December 2017 – January 2018 to visit family in England and refine the direction of my research following the dissolution of my arrangement with Don Luco, and several months in England before my return in 2019. The fieldwork thus developed into four distinct stages: the first four months spent living with Don Luco and his family in Jenaro Herrera; the second four months as a volunteer facilitator in El Espiritista's centre closer to Iquitos; and the final four months of that year as a temporary resident in the city itself. Further fieldwork continued in June 2019 through the *Chacruna* sexual abuse awareness initiative and more informal research when living in Iquitos during the following years.

August – December 2017

During the first four months of my fieldwork I lived and worked in Don Luco's ayahuasca healing centre in his family home in Jenaro Herrera as I had done previously, with visits to Iquitos approximately every couple of weeks for several days. I organised and participated in ayahuasca healing retreats with Western participants which lasted 8 days, involving 3 – 8 participants and 5 ayahuasca ceremonies, and occurring usually every couple of weeks with some participants having longer stays of up to one month at the centre. This usually involved shamanic plant *dietas* lasting 8 days, which we also facilitated. I supported participants in ceremony and throughout their retreats and was involved in daily family life in Don Luco's family home and the local community. As Don Luco's apprentice, I learnt about *vegetalismo* practice, the history of Don Luco's shamanic group, and shamanic healing methods. I also engaged in a couple of short 8 -day plant *dietas* during this time and went on a 5 - day trip to another region of the jungle with another local *vegetalista* and his son (not *ayahuasqueros*), not accustomed to working with *gringos*, who I made contact with through the female friend who I accompanied for this journey.

Although this period of fieldwork provided me with valuable research material, it was difficult to re-establish my role as primarily a researcher rather than centre facilitator in this familiar setting. As well as struggling to do this myself and feeling overwhelmed by the demands of running a healing centre whilst attempting to conduct anthropological research, my research demands were also difficult to communicate with Don Luco and family. My relationship with Don Luco and family became strained due to my fieldwork responsibilities creating more workload, as well as a shortage of visitors to the centre and therefore money at the time. Money and misunderstandings and disagreements about business decisions are a common cause of problems between Western and Amazonian partners in the ayahuasca industry. Gladly, we reconciled things between us, and I am able to look back on this temporary breakdown in our relationship as a helpful and necessary turn of events.

January – April 2018

For the second stage of my fieldwork between January and April I moved to Iquitos and began working with an English friend, an *ayahuasquero* with a healing centre in a district on the outskirts of the city of Iquitos. This was co-owned by his *maestro*, a local mestizo *espiritista* who I refer to throughout this dissertation as El Espiritista. *Espiritismo* encompasses different modalities of working with spirits to affect people's luck, health, fortune and love life. It involves the use of 'spells' and is treated by some local people with suspicion.

They held ayahuasca ceremonies at El Espiritista's centre three times per week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday with most guests staying for five - day retreats including three ceremonies. Ceremonies usually involved one or two local participants as well as Westerners. They also facilitated shamanic plant *dietas* for Western participants, usually lasting 7 days. I volunteered as a facilitator there for these four months.

El Espiritista

El Espiritista was born in the jungle near Iquitos and moved to the city when he was small where he grew up in poverty in the district of Belen. He had a friend who boxed who he accompanied regularly to watch him fight. This friend would visit a *curandero* before his fights where he would drink plant medicines and undergo various treatments to make him stronger physically and spiritually, including drinking ayahuasca. At the age of 13 El Espiritista accompanied his friend and drank ayahuasca for the first time. Seeing he had a gift the *curandero* offered to teach him and from here his apprenticeship began involving long periods of *dieta* in the jungle with plant teachers. He began learning the art of '*espiritista*', as well as *ayahuasquero*, *vegetalista*, *oracionista* and *rosacruzista* (Rosicrucianism) and was given the title of *maestro* at the age of 17. Sixty - eight years old at the time of my fieldwork he has many years experience as an *espiritista* and *ayahuasquero*. He had served his local community and other parts of Iquitos for many years as he still does today, travelled to different parts of Peru to perform healings, and began working with foreigners in his 50s working in various healing centres. He later established his own centre with the help of his English friend and apprentice where he holds ayahuasca retreats and ceremonies for locals and Westerners alike, and also from his house in the local town where he lives with his partner and their two daughters.

As well as participating in ayahuasca retreats, I was also able to observe El Espiritista's practice in the local community and participate a little in his family life. During this period, I often stayed at the healing centre and spent a lot more time in the city of Iquitos also where I lived with an American and Swiss couple, friends who also took part in ceremonies and acted as facilitators in the same centre.

I became much more engaged with the community in Iquitos during this period of fieldwork, which provided me with a better understanding of the diversity of spiritual and plant medicine practices people were participating in there as well as greater opportunities for conversation around the topics of my research, including the issue of sexual abuse, which was a key issue for some of my research participants during this time. Unexpected changes in personal circumstances meant that the apprentice with whom I had been volunteering decided to stop working with his *maestro* meaning that I no longer had a role in their centre.

Although this was another uncertain period of fieldwork for me, it provided valuable insights and led to the next significant phase of research.

May – August 2018

The final period of fieldwork during 2018 was spent in the city collecting further research data. This involved further interviews with locals and Westerners and the passing of day- to - day life in Iquitos. This period of fieldwork also provided me with further opportunities to explore ayahuasca use and wider healing practices in the locality. During this time, through contacts I had in the city, I was able to meet one of the oldest *curanderos* in the city referred to by my local contact "*the last real curandero in Iquitos*". He lives in the Punchana community of Iquitos, a local barrio where various *mestizo ayahuasqueros*, exemplifying local medicine practice, serve the local community from their homes. Although I gained

some insights about the history of ayahuasca shamanism in the region from him and received a beautiful *ventiada* (healing using the *chakapa* leaf instrument), he was partially deaf so our interview was not very successful.

Happily, I was able to form a closer relationship with two other local *ayahuasqueros* in Punchana, Don Orlando and Don Luis, whom I met through an American friend working with the charity *Amazon*

Promise on a project to help bring traditional and Western medicine to remote communities in the region.

Before meeting us, they had no previous experience holding ceremonies for

gringos. I did not initiate this



Figure 11: “The last real curandero in Iquitos” according to a local source.

contact, which I believe would have gone against the ethics of anthropological inquiry as it would have interfered too much with local practice, but I was very happy to be part of this encounter and it provided a unique research opportunity. I attended three ayahuasca ceremonies with Don Luis and Don Orlando, two of which I recorded. I also conducted life-history interviews with them jointly and spent time with them before and after ceremonies in conversation. Their practice and beliefs are representative of traditional ayahuasca practice in the urban setting of Iquitos.



Figure 12: Don Orlando (pictured left) and Don Luis (pictured right).

Don Luis and Don Orlando

Don Luis and Don Orlando were 76 and 77 respectively at the time of my fieldwork. They lived in the Punchana district of Iquitos where they had lived all their lives and held ayahuasca ceremonies in Don Luis' home for local patients, or simply together, most Tuesdays and Fridays, as is traditional locally. Neither Don Luis nor Don Orlando have been professional *curanderos* in that they have kept other jobs throughout their lives and do shamanic work alongside, as was typical locally until recently. Don Luis had worked on the port markets selling fruit and vegetables from a young age and became a carpenter in later life. Don Orlando had worked as a carpenter also. Don Luis first drunk ayahuasca at the age of 12 when his sister was ill with body aches and loss of appetite caused by *brujería*. They went to see a *curandero* who cured her and invited Don Luis to learn with him as he saw he would be able to work with "the medicine." Don Orlando entered apprenticeship in similar circumstances but aged 32 when his partner became ill and was cured by a *curandero* who came from Brazil. Don Luis and Orlando learnt from their different *maestros* through ayahuasca ceremonies and long *dietas* in the forest (*el monte*). Don Luis left his *maestro* he says because he worked with "the bad as well as the good". He joined Don Orlando and his *maestro* Alberto with whom they continued to learn until his death, and with whom they continue to work spiritually, calling his spirit to join them and guide them for every ceremony.

During the last month of my fieldwork during 2018 I did two tobacco purges and a week - long shamanic *dieta* with a female British *tobaquera*, apprentice to a local male *tobaquero* whom I visited and interviewed. I also met and interviewed a female European *ayahuasquera* and psychologist, who had a retreat centre in the region. I became acquainted with several Shipiba *ayahuasqueras* and one mestizo *ayahuasquera* who became a key informant. I refer to her as La Doctora throughout this dissertation as she wanted to remain anonymous due to the nature of our discussions about sexual abuse at the hands of some of the male *ayahuasqueros* she had worked with. For La Doctora, her ayahuasca and healing practices are greatly connected with her Christianity (Catholicism).

La Doctora

La Doctora is an *ayahuasquera* and *oracionista* (who work with *oraciones* – prayer) in her 40s from Iquitos. She entered into apprenticeship after a near fatal illness caused by *brujería*, and what she describes as a miraculous healing in which she was instructed by God in a vision to become a healer. This propelled her to learn the shamanic arts so she could better protect her family and especially, she says, women who suffer many abuses. Her apprenticeship involved three months of fasting during which time she walked the streets of Iquitos in trance receiving teachings and prayers (*oraciones*) with which she could heal. She also apprenticed as an *ayahuasquera* with a group of male ‘*maestros*’ for several years but following their abuses of women in ceremony and attacks on herself, she left them to continue her work alone. La Doctora lives with her two children and serves her local *barrio* in Iquitos as an *oracionista* healer as well as attending church each week as a devoted Catholic. She expanded her practice to serve Western tourists and travellers in 2012 when she began working in a touristic ayahuasca centre in the region alongside another *ayahuasquero*.

This final period of fieldwork provided interesting comparative material about the local uses of ayahuasca and understandings of illness and healing, alternative healing modalities besides ayahuasca shamanism in the region, including traditional practice and Western imports, and valuable data about women’s perspectives.

Fieldwork 2019

I returned to the U.K in August 2018 where I began the analysis of my research material and writing up whilst living in a Kadampa Buddhist centre near York until April 2019. It was during this period that I became involved in community activism as a member of *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Medicines*' 'Ayahuasca Community Committee', a committee devoted to raising awareness of key issues across the global ayahuasca community and providing information and materials aimed at community safeguarding. I began writing for *Chacruna*'s website in 2017 when their Director, fellow ayahuasca anthropologist Dr. Bia Labate, contacted me to write an article following a presentation I gave at *Breaking Convention* conference 2017 in London focusing on ayahuasca related deaths and their reportage in the media (Sinclair 2017) and became more involved when we established the 'Ayahuasca Community Committee' in 2018 and launched the sexual abuse awareness initiative, which I led.

Like many ayahuasca novices I had no idea that sexual abuse at the hands of *ayahuasqueros* and facilitators was an issue when I first arrived in Iquitos, Peru, in 2014, but soon became aware of the problem through encountering harassment and abuse for myself and through the experiences of other women. After editing Daniela Peluso's article on the issue of sexual seduction and abuse in ayahuasca contexts (Peluso 2014) for *Chacruna*'s website shortly after my return to the U.K following fieldwork, we decided to collaborate with other researchers and experts to produce sexual abuse awareness guidelines for the ayahuasca community. The *Chacruna Institute Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* was published in 2019 (Appendix C) and has since been translated in to 11 languages (Chacruna 2019). I will discuss the process of creating the guidelines and the issues it raised in more detail in Chapter Seven.

I returned to Iquitos in May 2019 where I spent the duration of that summer distributing the *Ayahwasca Community Guidelines for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* in English and Spanish on the ground and conducting further research on the issue. This included conducting interviews with women who had experienced sexual abuse. We also presented and distributed the guidelines at several conferences: ICEERS *World Ayahuasca Conference* in Girona, Spain, May – June 2019; *Breaking Convention* in London, August 2019; and *Bioneers Conference* in San Francisco, November 2019. I lived in Iquitos until December of that year and became acquainted with Don Pedro, another local *ayahuasquero* in the urban centre of Iquitos, who appears briefly in this dissertation.

I then returned to England for several months to meet with my supervisors and spend time with family before travelling back to Iquitos in March 2020. One-week later, lockdown for the Covid-19 pandemic began in Peru (16th March). I decided to remain in Peru for the duration of the ‘first wave,’ living with my partner and a couple of friends of ours who had found themselves stranded in Iquitos (somewhat voluntarily). During this period the ayahuasca industry effectively shut down, the impacts of which I wrote about for *Chacrana* (Sinclair 2020). Along with my partner I ran a relief campaign for local people in the region affected by the pandemic, largely related to the ayahuasca and tourism trade, whilst also writing my thesis from a make-shift office in the laundry room of our house. I became pregnant in April 2020 and decided to return home to England in October for the birth of my daughter in January 2021. I returned to Iquitos for six months following the death of my father in November 2021 during which time I saw the international ayahuasca trade resume. I have since lived between England and Iquitos. Inevitably, my work with *Chacrana*, the pandemic and these significant family events directly or indirectly influenced my thought processes during the writing up stage.

Methodological Approach

“In speaking of the spiritual problem of modern man we can at most frame a question, and we should perhaps frame it quite differently if we had but the faintest inkling of the answer the future will give.”

(Carl Jung, ‘The spiritual problem of Modern Man’ in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, 1931)

My questions and the focus of my research changed throughout my fieldwork, as they had during the couple of years before in which I had been formulating the research when living and working in *Jenaro Herrera* and back in England. I was generally researching the development of ayahuasca shamanism in the region but was interested in many different aspects of the phenomenon. While uncertainty about my research focus was at times a source of anxiety, it allowed me to engage in whatever arose, asking the questions that came up at the present time and following the avenues of research that presented themselves.

This approach was in line with the spirit of the Iquitos ayahuasca community, of “*going with the flow*”, “*following the signs*”, not being attached to outcomes, and trusting the Universe, Spirit, or God etc. to guide the way. It is common for Westerners in Iquitos to state “*there’s no such thing as a coincidence*” and many of them including short term ayahuasca motivated travellers and long-term residents refer to “synchronicities”, a term first coined by Carl Jung to refer to ‘meaningful coincidences’. Jung described synchronicity as an ‘acausal connecting (togetherness) principle,’ when meaningful associations can be found between events with no causal connection (Jung 1952). The concept has been adopted in popular culture, for example in *The Celestine Prophecy* (Redfield 1993), which describes a journey of awakening in Peru guided by synchronicities, and the term is widely used across spiritually orientated communities in Western contexts to refer to meaningful events that guide individuals or groups towards specific places, people, or realisations. Less overtly perhaps, anthropological inquiry is often conducted in this way also.

According to some anthropologists, 'serendipity' is the "essence of fieldwork research" (Pieke 2000 :138) and has been recognised as a valid methodological approach since the 1940s (Rivoal and Salazar 2013). Sociologist Robert Merton emphasised the 'serendipity component' of qualitative research and the potential for serendipitous events to lead to theoretical advances (Merton 1948). Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss included serendipity in their 'grounded theory' and emphasised that research questions should be narrowly defined allowing for flexibility and originality (Glaser and Strauss 1967). More recently, serendipity is at the centre of what anthropologists Hazan and Hertzog have termed 'the nomadic turn' in Anthropology, defined by innovative and novel research methodologies, questions, and theory that is formed from and for the communities we study rather than imposed from outside or by tradition (2011).

According to the experiences of many of my Western research participants it is usual for synchronistic or serendipitous events to follow crisis, for instance the receiving of a 'calling' from ayahuasca following a tragic life event. Furthermore, synchronicities may be disguised as crisis themselves. Anthropologist Andrew Russell has argued, in connection with his experience of appendicitis on the day his eldest son left the country, that the Jungian approach enables us to explore the 'symbolic density' of "coincidences" in our lives finding meaning and 'the potential for healing in a situation that could easily be regarded as nothing but the random and cruel concatenation of adverse life events' (Russell 2012: 203). His perspective is similar to what Pelto and Pelto referred to in anthropological inquiry as 'serendipity, disguised as catastrophe' (1978: 185), a concept which seems appropriate to describe some periods of my fieldwork. Events that initially may have appeared as crisis, became opportunities, which in themselves provided interesting research material and became signifiers of new stages in my research necessitating movement to different field-sites. These unexpected turns in my research journey gradually enabled me to give in to the

flow of the fieldwork and to adopt the Jungian ethos of my research community more consciously as a methodological approach. The most significant of these events was the breakdown of my working arrangement with Don Luco.

The breakdown of relations with Don Luco was what precipitated my movement away from Iquitos. This felt like a significant crisis point in my research at the time but became an opportunity to expand its gaze and gain experience in various other settings. Indeed, a great benefit of the movement between field-sites was that I was able to experience life in the community from different vantage points, thus contributing a variety of perspectives to the research. I was also able to appreciate much better the diversity of mestizo shamanic practice that exists in the local area and to address differences in practice through my analysis, which proved highly beneficial to my work. It was also during this latter part of my fieldwork, as well as post fieldwork spent in the city, that I became acquainted with several female *ayahuasqueras* and longer-term female participants in ayahuasca shamanism who became key participants. My greater acquaintance with women in the field, which had been limited until that point, significantly influenced the direction of my research.

In the end, my research would not be confined to any one aspect of the ayahuasca culture in the region, or sub-community within it, and developed into a multi-sited ethnography. Multi-sited ethnography has become popular for anthropological research in the contemporary globalised world because the ‘conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system’ is no longer valid for much contemporary research, but rather, ‘multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the "local" and the "global," the "lifeworld" and the "system”’ better represent communities and research subjects in the globalised world (Marcus 1995: 95). As Marcus argues, the global cannot be considered separate from a given community and possible field-site, but rather ‘is an emergent dimension of arguing about the

connection among sites in a multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1995: 99). This also reflects the very nature of the ayahuasca phenomenon both in Iquitos and beyond, which incorporates a wealth of different people and perspectives that cannot be disentwined and understood in isolation. Multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) is appropriate for ayahuasca research as it reflects the multitude of practices and perspectives meeting and mixing in the context of ayahuasca globalisation.

The focus of my dissertation on gender dynamics and sexual behaviour emerged gradually. I have always been interested in religion and spirituality as the very subject of this dissertation and my entry into the field suggests, so cosmology formed a key part of my research interests throughout fieldwork. The focus on gender, however, only became clear during the writing up stages. It is no coincidence that it was also then that I began working with *Chacruna Institute* to bring awareness to the issue of sexual abuse across the global 'ayahuasca community'. My involvement in this project was both inspired by and influenced my research. Indeed, I now see my initial connection with *Chacruna* and the collaboration that developed as synchronistic events that guided me to realise the contribution my research could make.

Research Methods

My research consisted of participant-observation and journaling, apprenticeship style research including shamanic *dietas*, ayahuasca ceremonies, interviews, and questionnaires.

Participant-observation and 'going with the flow'

My primary method of research across the field-sites was participant-observation. I took fieldwork notes almost daily with days off when it was practically difficult to do so due to a lack of time alone and my working obligations, or for relaxation following intense periods of activity. I usually made notes at the end of each day and often in the mornings following

ayahuasca ceremonies. Occasionally I would make notes during activities or conversation also, if there was a specific concept I needed help remembering, but usually I felt this kind of note taking was too interfering and off-putting for my research participants. My fieldwork notes cover daily activities, conversations around the themes of my research, ceremonial experiences when shared, local customs, ritual, and significant interactions between local and Western actors in the field. It was sometimes difficult however, to keep up with unfolding daily events. As a friend who accompanied me throughout my fieldwork and I would often joke, “jungle life” and life in Iquitos is unpredictable: you never quite know what’s going to happen each day and often the passing of a week feels like a month has gone by! This feeling reflects the diversity and depth of experiences involved in plant medicine work as well as the erratic nature of everyday life in the region, due partly to the impact of changes in the climate on living conditions, connected to unreliable electricity, communications, and transport systems.

We experienced a very heavy rainy season in the first few months of my research which would quite regularly flood the house in Jenaro Herrera or that of our neighbours. Several days were spent by Don Luco and his sons helping to reconstruct the roof of the family who lived opposite us at one point, which had been completely destroyed by high winds.

Conversely, during the dry season, it was sometimes impossible to travel by boat due to low river levels so plans for the day would often go awry. Furthermore, we were sometimes distracted by the need to help our own or street dogs living in the community in Jenaro Herrera, often afflicted with a myriad of diseases, and other animals living in close proximity could always provide unexpected interferences. For instance, the first time I visited Don Luco’s house there was an infestation of huge moths throughout the whole town, which we were constantly removing from the house. I thought this must be a seasonal occurrence, but they did not return during the following years. During one retreat at Don Luco’s centre we

were visited by a snake, gladly non venomous, and during another, an iguana, as well as the usual bats and spiders which sometimes provoked panic amongst our guests. Although I arrived in the Amazon with a fear of spiders and dislike of insects, before long, I was living happily with a tarantula in my house whom I called Tim.

I became well - adjusted to jungle life including the simple local diet of fish, plantain, yucca, and rice. Although very off putting for me at first, fish soup became a favourite breakfast, which I missed when I left Jenaro Herrera for the 'bright lights' of Iquitos. Yet life there was just as full of surprises and unexpected turns, or other city gossip (often around accusations and experiences of *brujería*), the quite frequent occurrence of protests or strikes, and occasionally riots which effectively closed off the city. Thus, my research method of "going with the flow" was as much a coping mechanism as a homage to the community ethos.

Apprenticeship

A key part of my participant-observation research was engagement in shamanic apprenticeship with Don Luco, which involved learning about the uses of rainforest plants, the cooking of ayahuasca, ceremonial practice and the process of *dieta*, enabling deep immersion through practice. Some Western apprentices pay their *maestros* quite high fees for apprenticeship training, something which is not usual practice locally but has become more common through commercialisation for the Western audience. Apprenticeship programs of three months or more, in which groups of participants engage in apprenticeship training through ceremonial, *dieta* and verbal guidance from predominantly Western practitioners and centre owners who learned under a local *maestro*, are also now available to Westerners through some centres in the Iquitos region for fees up to \$ 30,000.

However, more organically, Western apprentices may gain experience and knowledge through practice with their *maestros* in return for bringing Western visitors to their local

maestro's ceremonies and retreats, as I did. In these instances it is usual for Western apprentices to manage the business side of their *maestro*'s retreat centre, which involves creating a retreat centre website, bringing in Western participants, managing the centre and organising retreat schedules and proceedings for the guests, acting as administrator in email correspondence with potential participants, and overseeing finances for the centre, all roles which some centre managers and apprentices are able to hire others to assist with. I gained assistance with the website creation but conducted all other roles myself. Centre managers and facilitators also act as mediators between the local shaman, centre workers and guests, and provide counselling and guidance to participants throughout ayahuasca retreats and *dietas*, as I did. Often facilitators are hired to assist with facilitation and counselling, something I was able to do during the second year of my time with Don Luco and on a voluntary basis with a friend during the first three months of fieldwork.

Conducting an apprenticeship while fulfilling the requirements of running an ayahuasca centre is challenging. Specifically, the time and financial pressures of running an ayahuasca centre make conducting *dietas* required for apprenticeship particularly difficult. Fulfilling the requirements of anthropological fieldwork in addition to these commitments eventually became too much for me to manage. I did however engage in several short *dietas* and gain a basic level of knowledge that has greatly benefitted the research and was able to continue to learn about shamanic practice through other experienced practitioners and through personal experience.

Other anthropologist-apprentices have experienced similar difficulties during and following their apprenticeship research due to the high levels of loyalty their teachers expected of them, and the duties they were expected to complete for them (Downey, Dalidowicz & Mason 2015). The breakdown of the relationship between teacher and apprentice can lead to obstruction of the apprentice from their chosen craft, and in the apprentice anthropologist's

case, potentially the demise of their research, the methodology and trajectory of which may be seemingly dependant on this relationship . I learned this through experience, as relations with Don Luco's centre proved beyond my capacity as an anthropologist- apprentice.

Happily, in my case there were further opportunities to continue learning in other settings and leaving Don Luco's centre became beneficial to the research as it provoked deeper immersion in the Iquitos ayahuasca community and engagement with gender issues and *brujeria*, which became key focuses.

Interviews

Although interviews were not my most important method of research, I conducted sixty semi-structured interviews with research participants across the three field -sites: twenty with local Peruvians, including seven *ayahuasqueros* (two women) and one local mestizo *tabaquero*; twenty with Western residents in Iquitos including four *ayahuasqueros*, one *tabaquera*, and only four women; and twenty visitors to the region made up of eight returning visitors including two women and twelve 'tourists' including six women. My research favoured more experienced perspectives, and the sample was broadly representative of the gender imbalance in the field.

I conducted these interviews in various locations where I felt the interviewees would feel comfortable and that were quiet and private enough for us to talk and for them to feel able to speak openly. This included their homes, my home in Iquitos, and restaurants and bars during quieter hours. I gained verbal rather than written consent from all interviewees. The latter was impractical with locals, many of whom were illiterate, and would have made some Western research participants uncomfortable considering the suspicion with which many of them treat researchers considering the illegality of ayahuasca in their home countries. I decided to keep all interviewees anonymous in the interest of protecting their identities, apart from those

otherwise named within the research, for reasons already addressed, such as Don Luco and Ricardo Amaringo.. I conducted interviews in the interviewees' mother tongue, either in English or Peruvian Spanish.

I tailored interviews to individuals based on their position in the community and their interests and expertise as well as specific areas of my research, to which I felt they could contribute. Every interview was different but I would begin each one by asking the interviewee to tell me their name, age, where they were from, and a little about themselves and their life. I would plan questions beforehand but would always adjust these and ask further questions based on my interviewees' responses. My intention was always to be guided by their responses so interviewees could express themselves freely rather than be limited by my research questions. This process was more successful with some interviewees than others. Some were more conscious of trying to give me the information they perceived me to need or want, or hesitant about being able to provide valuable information. I found that in general local people were more uncomfortable with the interview process and provided shorter answers, but there were several exceptions to this rule. I often found that interviewees would offer some of their most interesting insights once I stopped recording when they clearly felt more relaxed. Thus, conversations following interviews also contributed greatly to my research material.

Questionnaires

As an ayahuasca retreat centre facilitator in the years before I began my fieldwork, I conducted simple questionnaires with all retreat participants for the purposes of gaining an understanding of their motivations and needs, and for gathering medical information in the interest of health and safety, as is usual across ayahuasca healing centres in the region. These questionnaires provided valuable research data about the demographics, motivations, drug

use, and medical history of retreat participants (Appendix A). I decided to keep the retreat questionnaires the same when I began fieldwork for the purpose of consistency and continued to conduct these questionnaires with retreat and research participants, until I had a total of 100 as this seemed a proficient number to provide sufficient data 80% of these questionnaires were administered with Don Luco's centre, 13% at the centre where I volunteered, and the final 7% through another centre in the region that I accessed through one of their retreat facilitators. All three centres attracted similar clientele with basic but comfortable lodging similarly priced at approximately \$100 per night. The data is therefore representative of ayahuasca retreat participants visiting 'middle range' centres in the region. My records of the data recorded from retreat questionnaires can be seen in Appendix B. I will refer to this data at various points throughout this dissertation.

Chapter Three: Mestizo Ayahuasca Shamanism within the Ayahuasca Industry

This chapter provides an introduction to ayahuasca shamanism as part of the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos, describing key components of local practices and developments through Western participation and commercialisation. I describe the growth of a spiritual healing industry around ayahuasca shamanism to respond to mental health problems typically associated by Western participants with living in a Capitalist, industrialised society removed from Nature, in contrast to local practices in which ayahuasca is considered to be a mediator of social conflict and illness caused by *brujeria* (witchcraft/sorcery). Highlighting *la dieta* as the central vehicle of shamanic apprenticeship within the mestizo *vegetalismo* tradition through which relations are formed with plant spirits including ayahuasca, I address how the practice has evolved and been re-interpreted through the recent participation of Western apprentices and participants in ayahuasca shamanism, and present key debates around the impacts of Western participation and developing practice. The last part of this chapter focuses on gender in the ayahuasca industry, outlining key dynamics and issues as a prerequisite to my ethnographic exploration of gender dynamics later in the thesis.

The Foundations of Ayahuasca Shamanism in Iquitos

Ayahuasca shamanism is a branch of mestizo *vegetalismo* shamanism entailing the use of rainforest plants (*vegetales*), or ‘plant teachers’ (Luna 1986), including ayahuasca, which become spiritual allies to the *vegetalista* or shaman through the practice of *dieta* involving dietary and sexual prohibitions. Most Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism assume that the practice is “*thousands of years old*”, and furthermore, that ayahuasca is used today as it has been for thousands of years. This is the common narrative on ayahuasca centre

webpages¹⁹, which has been propagated by ayahuasca centre owners and retreat organisers and is typically echoed by ayahuasca retreat participants attracted by the idea of engaging in an ‘ancient’ tradition. Yet, although ayahuasca may have been used for thousands of years in some capacity by indigenous peoples of the Amazon, this possibility cannot be proven and remains contentious for reasons discussed in the Introduction. What is quite clear is that, ayahuasca shamanism as practiced within the ayahuasca industry is a modern development of practices that have been developing in mestizo communities in the region since at least the rubber-boom period (1897-1912) (Taussig 1987; Gow 1996; Bianchi 2005; Brabec de Mori 2011; Shephard 2014; Homan 2016).

Within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism ayahuasca is used within the dual and interconnected practices of *curanderismo* (healing) and *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft), as well as love and luck magic (*pusanga*). These practices are based on understandings of the body and disease found across Amerindian cosmologies that connect the causes of illness with acts of *brujería*, whereby healing entails the removal of *brujería* by the *ayahuasquero* (Alexiades 1999; Rubenstein 2002; Pollock 2004, 2016; Freedman 2010, 2014; Whitehead & Wright 2004; Beyer 2009). This traditionally involves the removal of the malady using the action of *chupa* (meaning to ‘suck out’ the malady) and returning it to the sender usually in the form of *virotas* (pathogenic darts) used in *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) and shamanic warfare to attack shamanic rivals.

Pusangas are plant or animal substances used within Amazonian shamanism to manipulate desires, emotions, perceptions and actions – of animals as well as people (Alexiades 1999) - although most associated with sexual and romantic seduction (Dobkin de Rios 1985;

Alexiades 1999; Peluso 2003, 2021; Barbira-Freedman 2010; Shepard 2016) and usually taking the form of potions that are drunk (de Rios 1985). *Pusangas* are considered a normal part of seduction practices within some Amazonian communities, but otherwise conducted in secret and associated with sorcery in others (Shepard 2016). Although used by both men and women, a recurring theme across Amazonian society is of *pusangas* laced with menstrual blood (associated with female power and widely considered dangerous) used by morally dubious women to lure male *victims* away from their partner and family (Dobkin de Rios 1985:202). Yet, *pusangas* are also associated with enduring relationships. Indeed, some Amazonians argue that *amor cochinado* - love involving the use of potions, spells and charms - is more durable than love that occurs naturally and spontaneously (Dobkin de Rios 1985: 203). Other research emphasises the belief that once the spell wears off or is broken by another shaman, feelings of desire are replaced by feelings of repulsion towards the *pusanguero* (Peluso 2003: 164-71). *Pusangas* are often linked to infidelity and are a way in which socially unacceptable relationships may be explained and dealt with in Amazonian communities.

As well as causing feelings of attraction and love to arise, the effects of *pusangas* are associated with *saladerra*, a ‘culture-bound’ syndrome in Amazonia, which is a form of anxiety neurosis (Dobkin de Rios 1985), heart palpitations, disturbed dreams and insanity (Shepard 2016) with a common symptom of this insanity being that the receiver is unable to stop thinking of the *pusanguero* (Peluso 2003: 164-71). As Daniela Peluso has explained, madness is not typically associated with love in Amazonia, but with charm spells.

Pusanga can also be defined as ‘luck magic’ and refers to hunting magic as well as seduction practices used by shamans to attract spirits and for protection, showing the interconnectedness between seduction and predation in hunting and shamanism (Barbira-Freedman 2010), also associated with gender dynamics. There is indeed a strong connection

between courtship and hunting within Amazonian society (Peluso 2003). The connection between hunting, shamanism, predation and seduction represented by *pusanga* is applicable to my analysis of sexual abuse in touristic shamanic contexts within this dissertation. These male-orientated themes are also evident within shamanic initiation practices through which shamans form relations with spirit allies.

La Dieta

According to all the mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in my research, *la dieta* (the diet) is the most integral part of shamanic practice. It is through plant *dietas* involving the ingestion of Master plants and the following of strict dietary and sexual restrictions that apprentices form relations with plant spirit allies known as *doctores* (doctors) or *maestros* (teachers).

Amazonian shamanic knowledge is passed through the process of apprenticeship under the guidance of a *maestro*. However, as Don Luco would teach me as time progressed, and as other mestizo *ayahuasqueros* echoed throughout my research, the plants are the real *maestros* (teachers), and it is only through shamanic *dietas* with these plants that *vegetalistas* form relationships with their Master spirits and learn about their uses, among other things. These relationships between *ayahuasqueros* and the spirit of ayahuasca and other Master plants form the basis of ayahuasca shamanism and wider mestizo *vegetalismo* practice.

Curanderismo (healing) within the mestizo *vegetalismo* tradition involves the use of *icaros* (shamanic power songs) to call spiritual allies to enact healing.

As emphasized by Stephen Beyer in his comprehensive study of mestizo *vegetalismo* and *dieta* practice *Singing to the Plants* (2009) “the term *dieta*, and the corresponding verb *dietar*, is more comprehensive than suggested by its English equivalent” encompassing also sexual abstinence and social isolation in the forest as well as food restrictions (Beyer 2010:56).

Examples of plants and trees that are commonly dieted include: *sanango* (the main varieties used being *uchu* and *chiric*) giving the title *sanangeros* to *vegetalistas* specialising in the use of this tree; tobacco (*tabaqueros* specialise in the use of tobacco) , *chuchuhuasi*, *ajo sachá*, *bellacu caspi*, *lopuna*, *huacapurana*, *capirona*, *tamamuri*, *ayahuma*, *remocaspi*, *shihuahuaco*, *pinshacaspi*, *bobinsana*, *sangrehuayo*, *azucarhuayo*, *cumaceba*, *uvos*, *catahua*, *huacapu*, *chullachaqui caspi*, *huayracaspi*, and *punga*. There are many more. The roots or outsides of the barks from these trees are collected with machetes without harming the tree and placed in water (either raw or cooked) to be drunk. Ayahuasca can also be dieted, as well as other substances or objects such as crystals which are believed to provide protection, for example, *camalonga*, *agua florida*, and even *gasolina* (gasoline).

Dietary restrictions exclude salt, sugar, chilli, fat and pork. According to practice in the Iquitos region, the diet usually consists of plain fish (which must be toothless according to the rules of some practitioners), plantain, yucca, and sometimes rice. The eldest *ayahuasqueros* in my research, Don Luis and Don Orlando, recalled long ayahuasca *dietas* conducted during their apprenticeships “*en el monte*” (the forest) consisting of only a little bread and water.

The length of *dietas* varies lasting from several days to several months or even years, depending on the *maestro*, apprentice and the plant being dieted (8 days and 1 month were common lengths for *dietas* within my research). It is generally agreed however that for the purpose of apprenticeship, longer *dietas* are preferable and indeed necessary. *Ayahuasqueros* and *vegetalistas* are required to continue to diet throughout their lifetime following their initial apprenticeship in order to maintain power and plant spirit allies, usually referred to as *ayudantes*, meaning ‘helpers’ or assistants’. Long periods of dieting however, often include short breaks between *dietas*. As Beyer has indicated, the most experienced and powerful Master *vegetalistas*, called *bancos*, have dieted over a period of at least forty years (Beyer 2009: 200).

According to Don Luco the spirits of Master plants and trees are more knowledgeable than those of humans as they have been alive on Earth for many more years, some living for many thousands of years and therefore acquiring great wisdom. Within Don Luco's shamanic group the spirits of trees are usually referred to as *los abuelos* (grandfathers), although it is said that they may appear in many forms and different genders, a point of interest I will return to in subsequent chapters through my interrogation of the commodified image of "Mother Ayahuasca". Dieting in the forest away from human society and disengaging from human interactions and activities is believed to better enable the apprentice to become acquainted with these forest spirit entities. Indeed, shamanic *dietas* are traditionally – and preferably, according to all my informants – conducted in the forest involving long periods spent in isolation whilst ingesting plant medicines. It is through dieting with Master Plants that apprentices meet and learn from their spirits who may communicate through dreams and trance states induced by the plants' ingestion. Apprentices learn from them about their medicinal uses, gain power and protection, and receive *icaros* (shamanic medicine songs) with which they can call these spiritual allies to action within shamanic ceremony for healing and wider purposes.

The origins of the *vegetalismo dieta* are not entirely clear. Indicating he could find no clear agreed upon reasons for dietary restrictions, Luna suggested that the *vegetalismo dieta* must have its origins with indigenous beliefs and practice (Luna 1986: 52) but this is debateable and in contention with the views of some mestizos. Alex Gearin and Bia Labate have discussed how 'dietary taboos exist across virtually all human societies and they play important roles in religious and spiritual practices worldwide' (Gearin & Labate 2018: 177). Within indigenous Amazonian shamanism, dietary restrictions have been connected with male initiation rites involving ayahuasca (Langdon 1975) and enabling the formation of and negotiation of relations between humans and non-humans by shamans as the interlocutors

between their communities and the spirits of forest realms who, according to indigenous Amazonian cosmologies, ‘might take revenge on humans who have procured too much food from the environment and violated food taboos’ (Gearin & Labate 2018: 193). The connection between dietary and sexual restrictions and male initiation rites and ‘men’s cults’ is evident across Amazonian and Melanesian societies as Gregor and Tunzin’s comparative volume reveals (2001). Several authors in this volume highlight the female reproductive imagery in male initiation activities through which men ritually acquire reproductive power (Bonnemère (Chapter 2), Biersack (Chapter 4), Conklin (Chapter 7), Hugh-Jones (Chapter 11), and Gregor and Tuzin (Chapter 13) in Gregor and Tunzin 2001), a theme I will return to in my analysis of the gender bias towards male practitioners in mestizo shamanism in the next chapter.

Explanations vary slightly amongst mestizo *vegetalistas* but it is generally agreed that food and sexual restrictions ensure that a person’s body is cleansed and not interfered with through physical toxins and other energetic influences. It is often said that sexual restrictions are necessary because spirits are jealous (*celosa*) and repelled by human smells, fluids and especially sex. Don Luco explained that sexual relations show disloyalty to teacher spirits who require the apprentice’s full attention and commitment during *dieta*.

Practices vary but the *dieta* is usually broken with salt, considered a grounding substance. Garlic, lemon and chilli are also commonly used depending on the plant and the *maestro* giving the *dieta*. Apprentices are also usually required to follow food and sexual restrictions for a further period following the period during which they ingest plant medicines. The ‘post *dieta*’, as it is called, varies in length from several days to several months. Food restrictions are usually relaxed during this time. For example, following an eight - day *uchu sanango*

dieta, Don Luco would stipulate that a further month of post *dieta* must be followed involving no sex, pork, chilli, sugar, alcohol or other toxins such as illicit drugs and medication, but during which time salt, fat, seasoning and other meat is allowed. Following a seven- day *bellacu caspi dieta* El Espiritista would designate a further seven days of post *dieta* to be followed. Sometimes no post *dieta* is required. As with *la dieta*, post *dieta* rules vary depending on the chosen plant and shamanic teacher.

An agreement between the *dietero* and the plant spirit or spirits is made about the length of the *dieta* when it is opened, which must be adhered to. Breaking a *dieta* prematurely is considered dangerous and can result in psychological and/or physical damage or illness, which as Beyer has discussed, is believed to be caused by the spirit of the plant turning against the *dietero* (2009:59). Breaking the *dieta* prematurely is referred to as being *cruzado* meaning “crossed”, represented by being in a state of torment and confusion caused by “crossing” the spirit with which you are dieting. Cautionary tales about terrible illnesses and psychological disturbances are told about people breaking their *dietas* across Iquitos, and some warn that these transgressions can also negatively affect the *maestro* who gave the *dieta*, who may also be attacked by the plant spirit. Broken *dietas* can however be fixed with the help of the *maestro* who gave the *dieta*, or another. Usually, the *dietero* is required to do the *dieta* again to completion in order to gain forgiveness from the plant spirit, re-establish a good relationship, and gain the benefits of the *dieta* back.

It was communicated to me by the various *ayahuasqueros* in my research that the purpose of dieting is to invite the spirit of the plant or plants with which you are dieting into your body. Following *la dieta* shows dedication to the plant spirit or spirits, which is rewarded with the transference of knowledge and provides a clean space for them to reside. Indeed, it is said that if you follow the *dieta* correctly then the spirit of the plants with which you diet stays with you, literally “*stays in the body*”, as it is usually described (“*queda en el cuerpo*”). This

is how the apprentice acquires spirit allies. Thus, contrary to Western dichotomous perspectives that separate body and spirit, the connection between body and spirit within mestizo shamanism is close and porous. Here, the body is the meeting point between human and non-human realms acting as a gateway between physical and spiritual worlds. Through the dedicated practice of *dieta* the body can be made suitable, or ‘fabricated’ through intentional processes, as in Viveiros de Castro’s description of Amazonian male shamanic initiation rites (1987), in order to house spirits and their knowledge, therefore becoming a ‘body that knows’ as in McCallum’s depiction of Amazonian epistemology (McCallum 1996).

A shaman’s strength is sometimes described in terms of having medicine (*medicina*) in their body. The greater the strength of an *ayahuasquero*, the more medicine (*medicina*) they are said to have in their body and therefore spiritual power and knowledge. *Medicina* also relates and refers to *icaros*, shamanic songs gifted by and learned from master plant spirits, and also believed to be located within the shaman’s body. Having a large repertoire of *icaros*, representative of a multitude of spiritual allies, is related to having greater strength and shamanic power, always understood as gained through commitment to *dieta* practice.

The role of the shaman as it was most typically and consistently defined within my research is “mastering the spirits” (*dominando los espíritos*). In the realm of Master plant spirits predominantly used for healing or *medicina* as usually termed by mestizo practitioners, the privilege of mastery over them is earned through dedication to *dieta* practice and refers to mastering relationships with them, with both Master shamans and the teacher spirits of plants being *maestros*.

A *dieta* may also be ‘stolen’ by another shamanic practitioner through the use of shamanic attack, as occurs within shamanic warfare between rival shamans. A prominent western

apprentice in the Iquitos region described how his *maestros* had to fight off many attackers during his apprenticeship and in doing so, “*stole their diets*”. When a *dieta* is stolen it means that the spiritual ally is stolen and becomes the ally of the shaman who steals it, so the power and knowledge gained through the process of dieting is also transferred. A shaman or *brujo* may also steal someone’s *dieta* simply in the interest of gaining power without having to do the work a *dieta* requires. This is one reason why it is advised by experienced practitioners that you do not talk about your *dietas* in public and reveal with which plant you have been dieting, making yourself vulnerable to this form of attack. These occurrences have arguably increased within the context of commercialisation of ayahuasca shamanism and the growth of the ayahuasca industry, while on the surface, ayahuasca shamanism is presented to Western clientele in the commercial ayahuasca industry as a solely healing practice.

The Growth of a Spiritual Healing Industry

The globalisation of ayahuasca has created increased focus on ayahuasca within the *vegetalismo* tradition (Labate & Cavnar 2014) and led to the development of a global ayahuasca industry (Peluso 2014) with Iquitos at its centre, which has arisen to cater to the needs of Westerners with predominately healing and spiritual concerns (Fotiou 2010).

The ayahuasca industry in Iquitos was established through connections between local *ayahuasqueros* and Western apprentices or longer-term participants, connections which have been forming in the region since the 1970s (Barbira-Freedman 2014). For example, one of the major ayahuasca centres in the region was established in 2002 by an American man with his local Peruvian *maestro* to whom he was introduced by another American who had been visiting and bringing groups to the region since the 1980s. The centre was originally envisioned and established as a ‘jungle tour’ lodge with money from the man’s family, but visitors showed interest in his apprenticeship and especially ayahuasca, so he had the idea to

create an 'ayahuasca centre' instead. This became one of the biggest and most successful centres in the region and has provided employment for the American apprentice's *maestro* and his son for ten years. The owner in turn became a *Maestro* (Master shaman) and has taught several other Western apprentices. There are now many *gringo* apprentices and *ayahuasqueros* across Iquitos, several of whom run their own healing centres and conduct ayahuasca ceremonies alone or with their own apprentices, and others who work with their local *maestros*.

Whereas local ceremonies usually take place in *ayahuasqueros*' homes, Francoise Barbira-Freedman points to the use of the *maloca* as a ceremonial house and the introduction of shamans' botanical gardens as evidence of Western influence, as well as the strengthening of the ayahuasca brew for Western tastes (Barbira-Freedman 2014), a development which has been related to sexual abuse of female participants (Peluso 2016). In local ceremonies it is still usual for participants not to drink ayahuasca, but to receive healing from the *ayahuasquero* who does, whereas in touristic ceremonies all participants usually drink.

Bia Labate has summarized the impacts of ayahuasca globalisation as: "psychologization", with shamans likened to psychologists; "ritualization", whereby contemporary local practice is enhanced by ceremonial settings, performance, and exaggerated sacralisation for the tastes of international participants; "scientization" and "medicalization", with emphasis placed on the chemical components of ayahuasca and its utility as a 'medicine'; and "re-traditionalization", whereby 'traditional' aspects of ritual and clothing are re-appropriated by contemporary practitioners for the purposes of encounters with Westerners seeking what they perceive as 'authentic' experiences (Labate 2014). While these features are apparent in touristic ceremonies in Iquitos, there is also much evidence of resistance to such Western-orientated developments, especially in mestizo settings (as opposed to Shipibo) where shamans wear Western clothing, for instance. While shamans may be expected to play the

role of psychologist by Western participants, this is not a role they usually accept, apart from perhaps providing some basic advice regarding relationships and lifestyle, as they do with local ceremonial participants also.

Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos usually engage in ‘ayahuasca retreats’, which take place in jungle lodges and entail several ceremonies (usually 3-5) in groups of 4 – 20 people, over a period of 7-10 days, involving post ceremonial discussions in groups or individually with facilitators, and sometimes complementary practices such as yoga and meditation. Ayahuasca retreats in the Iquitos region generally attract first-timers with some returning visitors making up other retreat participants. Of my one hundred retreat participant questionnaire participants, 86 were going to drink ayahuasca for the first time. Returning visitors often find more informal routes to engage in ayahuasca ceremonies.

Western Participants: Research Data

The vast majority of ayahuasca retreat participants are Western nationals with 39% U.S citizens in my data (including 3 people who identified as mixed nationality); 20% British citizens; 22% European, a third of whom were German; 11% Canadian; 4% Australian; and only 4% other nationalities. This is unsurprising considering retreats are designed for Western people and differences are in line with geographical and cultural patterns (Fotiou 2010). For example, many U.S. ayahuasca retreat participants come from California which is more liberal than most of the rest of the Western world towards psychedelics. My interviewees were also similarly proportioned between these countries and perhaps disproportionately weighted towards British participants due to both I and the apprentice who ran the other centre where most of this data was collected being British. In line with Fotiou’s research also (Fotiou 2010:125), retreat participants in my sample ranged in age from 19-61

with the vast majority in their 20s and 30s (74%). Returning visitors and Western residents are only slightly older on average, as would be expected.

The majority of Western ayahuasca seekers are male. However, it seems that this gender gap is closing. Men made up 62% of my research questionnaire sample compared with almost three-quarters of Fotiou's sample (Fotiou 2010: 125). Fotiou argues that the gender discrepancy might be explained by 'the challenges that travel in South America poses for female travellers' (Fotiou 2010: 125). The greater number of women in my sample would then suggest that such fears for women may be decreasing. However, the risk of sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca settings has also become public knowledge in recent years (Chacrana 2019; Peluso et. al. 2020), making this argument unconvincing. I would suggest that the male bias could be explained by cultural gender dynamics whereby men would more typically travel abroad and engage in daring activities, and women were more typically bound by family and childcare commitments. The loosening of gender roles with the growth of the feminist and transgender movements in recent years might better explain the shift.

As with Fotiou's sample, my Western research participants came from a variety of backgrounds of class, education and employment (Fotiou 2010). However, I would add that, although many of them were not "well-off" or from wealthy backgrounds, they were all able to at least pay the cost of the flight to Peru, which makes them relatively better off than much of the Western population. Ayahuasca healing in Peru is in this way somewhat exclusive to Westerners who can afford to travel, and in most cases pay for retreats. As with Fotiou's sample, many were in 'alternative' fields of employment such as different forms of healing like reiki or massage. I also found that a large proportion of them were in between

employment or otherwise considering new paths of employment that would be “*more satisfying and in line with [their] outlook and interests*”²⁰.

Ayahuasca’s travelling clientele are united by their shared interest in natural medicine and alternative healing modalities, as well as “exotic” and indigenous cultures, and travel more generally. Many of them also have environmental concerns and an interest in sustainable living. This included veganism, permaculture, eco - housing, animal welfare and community - building. More specifically of course, they are connected by their desire to drink ayahuasca and engage in shamanic healing.

Fotiou’s research in Iquitos found that ‘shamanic tourists’ are predominantly motivated by healing and spiritual concerns and that many express a related desire to connect with Nature (Fotiou 2010). Specifically, ayahuasca is considered a cure for depression and other mental health problems by its Western audience, which have been labelled the ‘diseases of civilisation’ by ayahuasca scholars (Freska et. al 2016). Wider research has found that within Western circles, ayahuasca is often characterised as an antidote to the problems caused by industrialisation and modern materialism (Fotiou 2014; Labate 2014; Gearin 2016; Mesturini Cappo 2018). My research findings regarding Westerners’ motivations for engaging in ayahuasca shamanism are in line with existing research and expand it in certain directions.

According to my research participant questionnaire data (Appendix B), almost two thirds (62%) of retreat participants were motivated by a desire for “*healing*”. As Western people often remind you in Iquitos, to “*heal*” means “*to make whole*”.²¹ Holistic healing with ayahuasca is opposed with Western biomedicine. Thus, for Western ayahuasca seekers, spiritual and healing motivations combine. Healing is rarely equated with physical healing in this context as my questionnaire data reflected. Only 9% of participants stated an interest in

²⁰ This is a quotation from a research participant’s interview.

²¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/heal>.

physical healing and all these also had other motivations. Participants refer much more commonly to “*emotional healing*” or “*personal healing*”, which might be more specifically related to trauma, a life event such as the loss of a relative or healing relationships. Although ayahuasca is sometimes presented as a medical panacea, more experienced practitioners in the Iquitos region warn against viewing ayahuasca as a “*cure all*”, advising newcomers that healing and spiritual growth requires “*work*”.

At least one third of retreat participants in my research were motivated by spiritual exploration and growth, within which I include various reasons given which portray spiritual curiosity to more specific desires to “*connect with an alternate reality*” or “*regain spiritual gifts*.” One tenth of participants expressed an interest in “*consciousness expansion*”, or “*raising*”, and several a desire for greater understanding of existence and reality. Almost one third of retreat participants (32%) were hopeful of receiving life guidance with most of these referring specifically to wanting to understand their “*life purpose*.”, and over one quarter (27%) of retreat participants wanted to deepen their understanding of and connection to the “*Self*”. The “*Self*” in this community is sometimes called the “*Inner Self*”, the “*Higher Self*”, the “*Divine Self*”, or the “*Universal Self*”, is usually contrasted with the personal Ego, and often equated with connection with Nature by ayahuasca retreat participants.

One third of my questionnaire participants indicated they were suffering from or had suffered in the past from depression, and one fifth from anxiety. My wider experience in retreats suggests these percentages may be even higher. The search for alternative treatments is resultant of rising distrust in the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment, as well as the perceived limitations of biomedicine and a preference for holistic healing. As one retreat participant I interviewed remarked, “*I don’t like the business of Western medicine. I think that’s disgraceful. To commodify one’s health is wrong.*” He added, “*Western medicines*

seem to focus on one thing in particular whereas the medicine here focuses on ones being as a whole.”

The usual treatments available in the West for depression and other mental health problems are widely considered lacking in effectiveness by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism, many of whom have tried multiple routes of treatment with anti-depressants and psychotherapy or counselling before coming to ayahuasca shamanism. A typical view amongst Western participants is that these modes of treatment may alleviate symptoms but do not get to the root cause of mental illnesses. Depression and other mental health problems are not only considered untreatable by the usual Western medical means by many Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism but are widely considered by them as caused by problems associated with living in ‘Western society’, typically conceived of as disconnected from Nature and spiritually impoverished.

Many people turn to ayahuasca as a last resort. Indeed, several participants in my research described themselves as suicidal at the time of entering ayahuasca retreats. In one example, one of the participants in the first ayahuasca retreat I ever facilitated with Don Luco revealed he was suicidal following a psychological crisis at the end of his third ayahuasca ceremony (he had not indicated this or his severe depression through the screening process). He also revealed he had written a suicide note following his second ceremony. Gladly this crisis and the integrative talks and ceremonies that followed provided the turning point that was necessary to pull him out of his deep depression and away from suicidal thoughts. In a follow up interview six months later, this man said that having been completely sceptical previously, ayahuasca “*opened me up to spiritual possibilities*”. As this example conveys ayahuasca’s healing capabilities are bound up with its capacity to enable spiritual experience.

The ‘Ayahuasca Diet’ and the ‘Tourist Diet’

With the growth of Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism, *la dieta* has been adapted and re-interpreted for the transient Western visitor with the establishment of ‘the ayahuasca diet’ as a norm for all ceremonial participants, and the introduction of short-term plant *dieta* retreats, sometimes referred to within the ayahuasca community as ‘tourist diets’ which some slightly longer-term and often more experienced Western participants partake in preceding or following ayahuasca retreats.

The ‘Ayahuasca Diet’

The ‘ayahuasca diet’ is compulsory for ayahuasca retreat attendees in ayahuasca centres across the Iquitos region and beyond. It is an adaptation of local *dieta* practice involving dietary and sexual restrictions that must be followed for a minimum of 3 days pre and post ceremonies, usually longer. As described by Gearin and Labate, at the very least, Westerners are instructed to avoid red meat, pork, sugar, spicy food, coffee, alcohol, illicit drugs, anti-depressant medications and sexual activities, but most centres and ceremonial organisers identify many more foods or substances (including other medications and some natural remedies) that are off limits due to apparent contra-indications with ayahuasca, as well as behavioural restrictions or recommendations such as avoiding stressful environments (Gearin & Labate 2018).

Ayahuasca retreat attendees are usually led to believe by centre owners and information available on the internet that by following these restrictions they are following age old traditions surrounding the practice of ayahuasca shamanism that have been followed by indigenous Amazonian shamans since ‘the dawn of time’. However, the ‘ayahuasca diet’ as prescribed to Western tourists is very much a Western invention, and as Gearin and Labate argue, is a ‘clear example of cultural reductionism’, part of ‘a wider trend of the ethnic

service economy (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009) in which complexities of indigenous knowledge are reduced to that which is comprehensible, permissible, and attractive to the Western mind' (Gearin & Labate 2018: 188).

According to local practice, ayahuasca ceremonial participants must refrain from eating after lunch before an evening ceremony that usually begins at 10pm, when electricity goes out, or sometimes a little earlier. They are also often instructed to fast until midday the following day. Recommendations against eating pork are emphasized as well as against drinking alcohol. However, it is not uncommon for local ceremonial participants to bring *gaseosa* (sugary fizzy drinks) to ceremony and certainly not unknown of for *ayahuasqueros* to conduct ceremonies drunk. Whilst it is widely acknowledged that following a 'clean' diet avoiding foods high in sugar, fat and salt, and especially pork (high in fat and considered 'dirty') is preferable, dietary restrictions are rarely prescribed for the days preceding and following ayahuasca ceremonies in local contexts. Most long-term Westerners in the ayahuasca community in the Iquitos region also adopt this more lenient approach.

The 'Tourist Diet'

The growth of shamanic healing centres in recent years with the growth of the ayahuasca industry have created more comfortable conditions to conduct semi-isolated *dietas* in forest environments in *tambos* (small forest lodgings). Those dieting are therefore able to receive necessary assistance such as the delivery of food without the need for survival skills. The growth of the 'tourist diet' within this context has enabled the greater participation of Westerners in this aspect of shamanic practice in the region. 'Tourist diets' as they are sometimes referred by insiders, usually last for 7 days, sometimes a little longer or shorter even, meaning that they are open to transient visitors, often conducted following ayahuasca retreats or as part of longer planned visits. These *dietas* mirror shamanic dieta practice

involving the same restrictions as are applied within apprenticeship *dietas* whereby no meat, sugar, fat, spice or salt is allowed and a simple diet of rice, fish, plantain and sometimes eggs and beans is usually served. Adaptations of the traditional local *dieta* to better suit Western tastes and dietary concerns have been made in some cases so vegetables, salad and even fruit is sometimes served depending on the beliefs and preferences of the *maestro* and/or centre administering the *dieta*. Prohibitions on sexual behaviour and in many cases any physical contact are also applied and post-*dieta* rules also mirror those of traditional *dieta* excluding pork, alcohol, sex and spice for a designated number of days or weeks dependent on the plant being dieted and the shaman's instructions. 'Tourist diets' are aimed primarily at healing rather than apprenticeship learning, a novel development within the ayahuasca industry.

Typically, Westerners engaging in these kinds of *dietas* are interested in tackling psychological and emotional "blocks" within themselves whilst engaging in what is conceived of as an energetic and emotional as well as physical detoxification process, helped by the spirit of the plant or plants with which they are dieting. Whereas *dietas* might be prescribed to treat serious illnesses within mestizo society, they would not usually be conducted in this way for more holistic healing purposes. Apprentices are also able to partake in apprenticeship style *dietas* for shorter and longer periods within these more comfortable forest settings in *tambos*, usually assisted by their *maestro* and other locals.

Further adaptations of *La Dieta*, as I will address in the following chapter, have made way for the greater participation of Westerners and I argue, also women, in an industry that has been dominated by men.

Anthropological Perspectives on Westernization and Commercialisation

The adoption of ayahuasca as a treatment for mental health problems is contentious among anthropologists. Brabec de Mori has highlighted the incongruence between this approach and native approaches in the case of the Shipibo among whom ayahuasca is saved for those considered to be the strongest and of stable mind (Brabec de Mori 2021). However, the adoption of ayahuasca as a tool for healing mental health problems has been enabled through the agency of local actors as well as Westerners through the willing exchange of knowledge and experience. While there are cases of malpractice, those suffering from extreme mental health problems such as psychosis are not usually admitted to ayahuasca retreats due to the screening processes most centres have in place.

Olivia Marcus has discussed the ‘incommensurability’ between the ethical paradigms of Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism and Peruvian *vegetalistas* within ayahuasca healing encounters in relation to tensions between globalised ayahuasca shamanisms and therapeutic integration practices (Marcus 2022). Marcus also highlights the conflict between Western psychotherapeutic perspectives that view ayahuasca as a medicine and participants as patients engaged in a therapeutic process, and the relational paradigm at the core of Amazonian *vegetalismo* involving sorcery-based understandings of illness and healing in which participants – rather than being passive recipients of medical care – are actively engaged in relations with non-human as well as human actors to acquire knowledge and healing (Marcus 2022). Yet, my research suggests that these different paradigms are not necessarily in conflict but rather working in complementarity amongst insiders in the Iquitos ayahuasca community where knowledge is being exchanged and incorporated between mestizo healers and western apprentices and practitioners. I argue that the incorporation of understandings of shamanic perspectives by Western practitioners dealing with issues of mental health and trauma points to valuable new approaches to healing these problems.

Daniela Peluso and Alex Gearin have highlighted the contradictions between the commercialism of ayahuasca tourism and the anti-capitalist, anti - consumerist values which the ayahuasca industry ‘sells’ (Peluso 2016; Gearin 2022). Gearin has also indicated how desires for accumulation typical of Amazonian actors in the ayahuasca industry are manifested in the ways sorcery is used in the battle for wealth, status and international clients (Gearin 2022). Indeed, shamanic rivalries within the ayahuasca industry and with shamans on the outskirts of it are rife in the Iquitos region, and also related I argue, to cases of sexual abuse of female participants. This reality is in tension with the commercialised image of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ as a purely benevolent healing entity and substance associated with ‘Mother Nature’.

There is ethical debate about the participation of Westerners in ayahuasca shamanism within as well as beyond the Iquitos community. Some question the very involvement of Western participants in Amazonian shamanism at all, arguing that it is detrimental to the quality and integrity of traditional practices (Dobkin de Rios 2006; Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008). These views are not in line with mestizo tradition, I would argue, which is characterized by relations with outsiders and draws power from these relations through appropriation and transformation of beliefs and practices (Gow 2009; Santos-Granero 2009; Marcus 2022). Indeed, in both indigenous and mestizo shamanic traditions historiographic evidence reveals the importance of cross-cultural interactions, being associated with power and knowledge (Suárez Álvarez 2023).

Local and Insider Perspectives on Western Involvement

In relation to ‘white people drinking ayahuasca’ Gayle Highpine has argued that popular perceptions of the ayahuasca tourism industry as ‘cultural appropriation’ are contrary to indigenous and mestizo views, which are welcoming towards outsiders and consider

ayahuasca shamanism as an inclusive practice (Highpine 2018). My research in Iquitos and the mestizo town of Jenaro Herrera largely supports these arguments.

Locals in my research did not seem to consider their *cultura* (culture) as something at risk of being damaged or changed by the actions of outsiders. For mestizos in my research, *cultura* is associated with one's homeland and is described as being "*in your blood*" ("*en tu sangre*"). For instance, Don Luco suggested I would always go home to England "*because this is your culture, because this is in your blood*". The association of culture with the body and blood within mestizo Amazonian mind-sets is an interesting departure from typical Western conceptions of culture that warrants deeper discussion beyond the scope of this chapter. A Shipibo *ayahuasquera* I interviewed was similarly confused when I questioned her about how she felt about the impact of Western participation on their practices; she gave no credence to the possibility that Western participation would impact local tradition and practice, arguing, "*This is our culture*". According to these perspectives then, culture is closely related to individual and collective identity, considered under the ownership of those identified with it and not vulnerable to outside influences. Yet some locals question the decisions of local shamans to teach *gringos*, arguing that they will "steal" this knowledge only to give back to their own people. Most of the mestizo *ayahuasqueros* I conducted fieldwork with viewed the spread of shamanic knowledge to other countries largely positively, however. A common argument is that "*The medicine is to share. Whoever wants to drink can drink*". The importance of sharing "*the medicine*" was always emphasised by these *ayahuasqueros* who welcomed *gringos* as ceremonial participants and apprentices.

One potential reason for this openness to the inclusion of *gringo* apprentices is declining local interest in shamanic apprenticeship. Many local *ayahuasqueros* struggle to find local apprentices due to the lack of interest amongst their family members or wider kin. Urban *ayahuasqueros*, Don Luis and Don Orlando, had never acquired apprentices and lamented

that this was because “*nobody here wants to learn*”. El Espiritista’s children had not wanted to apprentice either, choosing careers in the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry instead. Similarly, Eduardo Luna reported that, ‘None of the four informants I worked with has a successor. They all complain that the young people are not interested or are not able to endure the *dieta* and continence necessary for learning from the plants. Their roles are readily assumed by charlatans who do not possess even a minimum of their knowledge of the myths, legends, flora and fauna of the region’ (Luna 1984:14).

Indeed, it is often local people’s impression that Western people are much more interested in plant medicines than are locals in the region. A Peruvian apprentice living in the city of Iquitos lamented:

“The people that live in Iquitos don’t trust in any plant... they say that if you drink ayahuasca you will go mad or you are a drug addict... they prefer chemical medicine and they don’t go to the forest. There are people that come from far away and they trust in natural medicine, in ayahuasca, but us no. I don’t understand why this happened.”

Thus, the taking of *gringo* apprentices might be understood partly as a necessary solution to a scarcity issue in the locality.

Some argue that this is the work of the spirit of ayahuasca “*calling*” out to would-be Western shamans in response to the threat of the possible demise of ayahuasca shamanism. Indeed, several times during my research I came across “*the gringo prophecy*”, told to me by Western research participants (although elusive within historical records), which basically communicates the argument that the participation of *gringos* in Amazonian shamanism is essential for the preservation of shamanic knowledge and practice. On the other hand, the influence of commercial interests is believed by many in the region to be contributing to the demise of shamanic practice.

Similar to Luna's informants' perspectives (Luna 1984:14), this decline is related by some local *ayahuasqueros* to a lack of commitment by many shamans and their apprentices working within the ayahuasca industry to engage in long-term *dietas*. A lack of *dieta* experience is considered as equalling a lack of shamanic knowledge and power in the local context and a prevalence of *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) is associated with the lack of commitment by many practitioners to engage in long *dietas* required to become a *curandero* (healer). As my own experience revealed, engagement in long *dietas* is made more practically difficult by the commercial pressures and time constraints involved in running touristic ayahuasca retreats.

Male Dominance of the Ayahuasca Industry

Men occupy the majority of leadership positions within the ayahuasca industry and make up the majority of *ayahuasqueros* working within it. The biggest commercial centres in the Iquitos region are all owned by men of American or European origin, apart from one, Nihue Rao, which is owned by a local male *ayahuasquero*, but previously established and co-owned with his American male apprentice. There are a couple of smaller centres owned by Western women and their partners, one owned by an Australian woman, as well as many owned by local male *ayahuasqueros* and a small number of lodges owned and opened in recent years by local female *ayahuasqueras*, for instance, AyaMadre, owned by Shipibo Maestra Estella Pandoza, representative of the gender imbalance shifting, especially amongst practitioners.

Capitalist industry and commerce is male-dominated across cultures and the ayahuasca industry is no exception. Yet, the gender imbalance seems particularly marked within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos. Within mestizo Amazonian communities it is more usual,

according to the way gendered domains work, for men to engage in relations with ‘outsiders’ rather than women (Seymour-Smith 1991), so their entering more easily into professional *curanderismo* makes sense in this light. It is also more usual, particularly in the past, for Western men to travel alone to foreign lands, especially for business pursuits. Following these gender dynamics across cultures, it was Western men who first developed the ayahuasca industry through their connections with local mestizo *ayahuasqueros*, the majority of whom are male. Thus, male dominance of ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos seems initially to have been exacerbated by Western participation and the growth of the ayahuasca industry. However, developments of practice through the influences of Western participation are now affecting the gender imbalance in the opposite direction, making way for the greater participation of women.

The Erasure of the Menstruation Taboo

‘Menstruation taboos’ are widespread in ayahuasca-using communities, whereby women are excluded from ayahuasca ceremonies and wider shamanic practice during menstruation (Kensinger 1995; Beyer 2009; Barbira-Freedman 2010; Fotiou 2010, 2014). Various reasons are offered for this prohibition, one being that women are more easily seen by spirits during menstruation and therefore more open to spiritual attack (Kensinger 1995); another being the spirits’ repulsion towards menstruation and childbirth (Barbira-Freedman 2010: 146) and also their dislike for the smell of menstrual blood as well as human sex and semen (Beyer 2009: 10; Fotiou 2014: 173).

Menstrual blood is perceived of as dangerous or polluting to adult men in most societies across Amazonia and Melanesia (Conklin in Gregor and Tunzin 2001: 150). Conklin argues that in Amazonia it is a common belief that jaguars are attracted to the smell of menstrual blood, which would of course be dangerous in forest environments. I never encountered this

belief but it is perhaps interesting to note that jaguars are also closely associated with shamans in Amazonia, with shamans often perceived as having jaguar spirits. In this light the dangers of menstrual blood might be connected with temptation for shamanic practitioners, perhaps towards dark spirits or forces associated with *brujería*. Indeed, the reason for the menstruation taboo most usually communicated to me during fieldwork was that a woman is more “open” when menstruating and so more likely to let dark spirits into the ceremonial space, which can be detrimental to others as well as herself. Contrary to this taboo however, some practitioners argue that drinking ayahuasca during menstruation enables a deeper level of purging, which is beneficial for the woman.

Whilst Evengia Fotiou regards the menstruation taboo as universally observed in her 2010 thesis based on research in Iquitos conducted between 2003 and 2007 (Fotiou 2010, 2014), I never encountered the prohibition being enforced in ayahuasca ceremonies. The menstruation taboo was widely known about by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism and female participants in retreats would sometimes ask about their participation in ceremonies when menstruating. But the taboo was not observed by any practitioners in my research, including in local urban contexts. Sometimes it was recommended for menstruating participants that they drink less as the effects might be stronger.

The erasure of the menstruation taboo in the region may have contributed to the narrowing of the gender imbalance amongst Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism or may indeed be an effect of it. Indeed, observing the menstruation taboo may simply have become impractical in the context of the ayahuasca industry introducing time constraints for foreign participants in ayahuasca retreats and negative cross-cultural perspectives of such exclusions of women, as well as changing perspectives within mestizo communities themselves, perhaps influenced by the influx of outsiders to the region in the context of globalisation. Fotiou indicates that some of her Western informants viewed the prohibition as sexist (Fotiou 2014:

173). In my research this view was also shared by some mestizo participants and practitioners.

However, a key rule of practice for male shamanic practitioners is that they should not be near a woman who is menstruating during a *dieta* (Beyer 2009:58). Furthermore, the total avoidance of women of menstruating age during *dieta* is necessary, according to the rules of some practitioners (Barbira-Freedman 2010: 145; Beyer 2009:58). I could not ascertain consistent explanations for these prohibitions, but it is generally agreed that a woman's energy is harmful to men during *dieta*. La Doctora, a mestizo *ayahuasquera*, said a man dieting should not be around a menstruating woman “*because it harms the man spiritually*” and “*all his projects go wrong*”. She emphasized that dieting during menstruation is not harmful for the female apprentice, though, only for men. Don Luco also suggested that it was a stroke of ‘luck’ (“*suerte*”) for a woman to begin menstruating during a plant *dieta*.

Beliefs around Pregnancy

Another issue of controversy is the participation of pregnant women and children in ayahuasca ceremonies. Research into the neurobehavioral, reflexological and physical development of Wistar rat offspring exposed to ayahuasca during pregnancy and lactation produced negative outcomes during adulthood in the test subjects (Rodrigues de Oliveira et. al 2011) but this research has been widely discredited by researchers on the grounds that rats are unreliable indicators of impacts on human health and that unrepresentatively large amounts of ayahuasca had been used in the research.²² Bia Labate (2011b) has addressed the controversy surrounding ayahuasca consumption amongst pregnant women and children

²² According to extensive informal discussions within the ‘ayahuasca researchers’ Google group of which I am a member.

within the Santo Daime and Uniao do Vegetal (UDV) ayahuasca religions, arguing that there is no evidence to suggest ayahuasca consumption is unsafe for pregnant women, unborn foetuses or children, while also highlighting the lack of existing research on these issues; she emphasises conflicts between religious, cultural and medical perspectives, which have become pronounced with the globalisation of ayahuasca.

Different perspectives on the issue have been recorded across Amazonian communities, for instance, among the Shuar, Perruchon indicates that some women believe the baby is born stronger when it receives ayahuasca in the womb (Perruchon 2003: 223) whereas among the Piro, Gow indicates that it is believed to cause abortion (Gow 2001: 138). My research indicated that perspectives of drinking ayahuasca during pregnancy vary across mestizo communities and among practitioners. Drinking ayahuasca and other plant medicines when pregnant was encouraged within Don Luco's family as it is believed to make the baby strong. This is a common view amongst mestizos across the region, but not one shared by all. Some among my research participants, such as La Doctora, discourage drinking ayahuasca during pregnancy, believing it to be dangerous. My discussion of developing gender dynamics amongst practitioners in the following chapter addresses how some of these perspectives have been incorporated by some *gringa* apprentices.

Rising Demand for *Ayahuasqueras*

A key trend that can be observed in recent years within the ayahuasca industry is rising demand for *ayahuasqueras*. According to Barbira-Freedman's research in 2007 there were no more than five female shamans in Iquitos compared to over one hundred male shamans (Barbira-Freedman 2010). As Fotiou has indicated (2014), the number of female *ayahuasqueras* working in the ayahuasca industry has risen greatly in recent years and continues to rise. Shipibo *ayahuasqueras* have acquired positions in several of the largest

centres in the Iquitos region including Nihue Rao, Dreamglade, The Temple of the Way of the Light and Madre Divina, and as already mentioned, AyaMadre, a smaller centre than these, is owned by Shipibo Maestra Estella Pandoza.

A Shipibo *Maestra* working at Nihue Rae whom I interviewed recalled how she was brought to work at the centre with her male relative due to demand for female *ayahuasqueras* from foreign customers. She explained: “*Many of the gringos in the centres want songs from women, conversations with women. The gringos, the foreigners, they love me a lot because they really love women, because of this they brought me here because they asked for women. They really want women here.*” My research evidence agrees with the argument already expressed in the literature that the rise of *ayahuasqueras* in the ayahuasca industry (as well as women only retreats) is due to external pressures from international participants (Beyer 2009: 11; Fotiou 2014; Echazú Böschemeier & Carew 2018).

This has created tensions locally between Shipibo and mestizo shamans as it is mostly Shipibo women who have been brought into the industry as shamanic practice is more typically practiced by both sexes among them. The commercial preference for female practitioners, along with their indigenous heritage, has meant that Shipibos have often been favoured by Western centre owners over mestizos, despite the fact that they are not native to the Iquitos region, as mestizos are. Yet, it is significant to note that most female Shipibos working in centres in the region work in assistant positions alongside male shamans.

Fotiau argues that rising demand for *ayahuasqueras* and the establishment of all female led ceremonies and retreats is due to the Western attraction to the “Divine Feminine” comprising of qualities such as ‘love, understanding, compassion, nurturing and helpfulness to others,’ and a backlash against male domination of ayahuasca shamanism and the prevalence of sorcery and shamanic warfare, considered ‘undesirable traits, all related to maleness’ (Fotiau

2014:174). I agree with this analysis to some extent but wish to emphasize that these gendered characterisations of spheres of shamanic practice are representative of Western dualistic stereotypes, which are not necessarily in-line with mestizo perspectives.

Qualities typically conceived of as ‘feminine’ by Westerners are attributed to *ayahuasqueras* on retreat website pages and related promotional sites. For example, Lidia of Dreamglade centre is described as ‘gentle and kind’ bringing to the centre ‘a lovely warm, maternal energy that is felt by both guests and staff alike.’ Descriptions of Maestra Estella of AyaMadre emphasize her uniqueness as a local *ayahuasquera* who owns her own centre in a ‘world of shamanism dominated by men’, describe the environment she creates as ‘nurturing’, and associate her healing practice with the ‘profound healing of mother nature.’²³ However, the Western attraction to the “Divine Feminine” is more clearly, according to my analysis, connected with the essentialisation of ayahuasca as a “Mother” spirit, a development also indicated by Fotiou (2014) and associated with Westernization. My research builds on and challenges in parts her analysis of this phenomenon in Chapter Five.

My research suggests furthermore that safety issues for women have also greatly contributed to rising demand for *ayahuasqueras*. The need for more *ayahuasqueras* and female apprentices and assistants was indicated across mestizo, Shipibo and Westernized contexts during my fieldwork and related to concerns over sexual abuse of female participants within ayahuasca contexts, the focus of Chapter Eight. Furthermore, a lack of female practitioners was also associated by local *ayahuasqueras* I interviewed with the problem of sexual abuse, acting as a deterrent against would be female apprentices, or indeed some women who suffer sexual attack - at the hands of male shamans and *maestros* – when beginning apprenticeship. This was something *La Doctora* faced when apprenticing under a group of male *maestros*. I

²³ https://ayaadvisors.org/listing/aya-madre-healing-center/?fbclid=IwAR2GllagGMIrJh_yiMVoYtrcjQXxz6ZZSBPrSjZXhmWmf5k5M70LtPXEvWU.

will provide analysis of the problem of sexual abuse in this context throughout this dissertation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I outlined the main features of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism highlighting the integral interconnectedness between *curanderismo* (healing) and *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) practices, *pusanga* (love magic), and *dieta*, the central component of shamanic apprenticeship, and adaptations of this practice due to commercialisation. As described in this chapter, the growth of a global ayahuasca healing industry responds to a mental health crisis in the West and growing interest in ‘alternative’ medicine and spirituality. I summarized the main impacts of Western involvement including the strengthening of the ayahuasca brew for Western participants related to sexual abuse of female participants; *brujería* occurrences due to shamanic rivalries between rivals within the commercial industry, also related to sexual abuse; increasing involvement of women in ayahuasca shamanism - both as participants and practitioners; and emphasis on the female spirit of ayahuasca, ‘Mother Ayahuasca’, developments that this dissertation will unravel and explore.

Chapter Four: Gender Bias Among Shamanic Practitioners

This chapter provides an ethnographic analysis of the gender bias amongst practitioners within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism. Focusing on *la dieta* as the central practice within shamanic apprenticeship in the mestizo *vegetalismo* tradition, I argue that the practice is traditionally more open to men within mestizo society due to the existence of gendered domains and the association of *la dieta* with the forest domain, making mestizo *vegetalismo* a male dominated practice. While the related ayahuasca industry remains male dominated, adaptations of practice through the globalisation of ayahuasca shamanism and its commercialisation for a Western audience, have made way, I argue, for the greater participation of women in *mestizo* ayahuasca shamanism, particularly *gringa* apprentices. My discussion also highlights issues around the greater participation of *gringas* and local tensions caused by Western influence as a pre-requisite to themes that are explored throughout this dissertation.

Ethnographic Evidence

It is widely attested across Amazonian ethnographies that the majority of shamanic practitioners are male (e.g. Fortis for Guna seers within his ethnography of the Kuna 2013; Fausto for the Parakana 2004; Brabec de Mori for the Shipibo 2014). In the case of mestizo *vegetalismo* the lack of female *vegetalistas* is well recorded (Dobkin de Rios 1972, Luna 1986, Tedlock 2005, Barbira-Freedman 2010; Marcus & Fotiou 2019), although reasons for the gender bias remain under-explored. In what follows I take the opportunity to explore the gender bias amongst practitioners of mestizo *vegetalismo* shamanism, focusing my analysis on relations with plant spirits acquired through the practice of *dieta*, and examine how recent developments are influencing the position of women in the field.

The English botanist Richard Spruce, who first introduced ayahuasca to the Western world, observed that women and children were not permitted access to it in the Amazonian communities he studied (Spruce, 1908: 425). Whilst ayahuasca ceremonies are open to women in contemporary Amazonian, mestizo and Western contexts, the greater number of male participants has been noted (Fotiou 2010). Ethnographic evidence suggests that women have been excluded from ayahuasca ceremonies during menstruation due to the belief that it makes them more visible to spirits and therefore more open to spiritual attack (Kensinger 1995). Both Dobkin de Rios and Luna have suggested that women are considered unsuitable for shamanic practice during their fertile, menstruating years (Dobkin de Rios 1972, Luna 1986), as has also been noted for some indigenous Amazonian communities including the Parakana (Fausto 2004:169) and the Kuna (Fortis 2013).

Some anthropologists have suggested that the lack of female *ayahuasqueras* in research samples is down to the laziness of anthropologists and is not representative of the field (Boschemeier & Carew 2018: 141 citing the examples Brabec de Mori 2014 and Labate 2011). They have argued that there are in fact many female shamans within Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism and the gender bias in the anthropological literature is due to over-rigid dichotomies in the theoretical framework and male bias in the anthropological field (Colpron 2005; Boschemeier & Carew 2018). Whilst it is true that in the past knowledge production about Amazonian shamanism was male dominated (Reichel– Dolmatoff 1971, 75, 81; Descola 1986; Harner 1972, 1980; Luna 1986; Chaumeil 2000), in recent years female anthropologists have come to prominence in the field, notably Bia Labate who is a prolific and influential anthropologist in the field of ayahuasca based studies (e.g. Labate 2011a, 2011b, Labate & Cavnar 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2018). For the Iquitos region Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1972; 1977; Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill 2008), Evengia Fotiou (2010; 2014; 2016, 2018) and Françoise Barbira-Freedman (2010; 2014) are three of the most notable scholars.

Their work makes the argument that apparent gender biases are the result of a gender bias amongst anthropological researchers, out-dated and inapplicable to mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region. Furthermore, my fieldwork revealed that local insiders recognise a gender bias in the field of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism so the bias cannot only be imagined or perceived through the eyes of the Western observer.

While there are clearly a greater number of male practitioners, there are also female mestizo shamans. For example, one of Stephen Beyer's mestizo shamanic teachers was female, although he does not focus on the issue of gender in his analysis of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism. It is also significant to note that three of the most prominent female anthropologists in the field of ayahuasca shamanism – Dobkin de Rios, Perruchon, and Barbira-Freedman – were also apprentices.

In Anne-Marie Colpron's dissertation focusing on gender amongst the Shipibo-conibo she noted that contrary to existing anthropological representations of Amazonian shamanism, there are many female shamans (Colpron 2005). However, Brabec de Mori has argued that Shipibo ayahuasca shamanism is in fact male dominated and the greater number of women entering into professional shamanic practice in recent years is resultant of Western influence involving increasing demand for female practitioners (Brabec de Mori 2014).

The pervading association of men with 'outside' and women with 'inside' activities in Amazonian societies (Seymour-Smith 1991) is one explanation for the lack of female *vegetalistas*. Alternatively, anthropologist and initiated Shuar shaman Marie Perruchon has suggested that the rise of patriarchy with the influence of outsiders, especially Catholic missionaries, may have led to the imbalance within Amazonian shamanism. She argues that the Shuar were traditionally egalitarian with both sexes having equal access to spiritual knowledge and power, but that women have gradually been demoted to assistant roles in

shamanic practice (Perruchon 2003). In the case of mestizo shamanism, the influences of patriarchy including the impact of Christian conversion and Catholicism in particular are to be found throughout its history, stretching back to the colonial period (Gow 1994; Highpane 2013). Christian influences may indeed have contributed to male dominance of mestizo shamanism but, as I address in Chapter Six, native understandings of Christianity are quite different from Western perspectives.

Most focus has been given to the gender bias within mestizo *vegetalismo* by Francoise Barbira-Freedman. She argues that Amerindian cosmology is male-orientated making it difficult for women to form relations with the spirits of Plant Teachers, which she suggests are usually female and furthermore, repulsed by menstruation and childbirth (Freedman 2010). Relating to these arguments, my research points specifically to the significance of *la dieta* within *vegetalismo*, being a male-orientated practice, through which relations with Plant Teachers are formed.

In what follows I offer new ethnographic evidence of the gender bias relating to the centrality of *la dieta* within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and *vegetalismo*, and address how recent influences of Western participation and the growth of the ‘ayahuasca industry’ have affected gender dynamics.

Encountering the Gender Bias

As described earlier, I travelled to Jenaro Herrera shortly after my first ayahuasca experiences as a volunteer to undergo an 8-day *dieta* with Don Luco in a temporary camp constructed in the forest as part of a small group of people in which I was the only female. At the time, I did not know it was unusual for a woman to accompany men in *dieta*. Yet, I remember Don Luco and the French travellers who accompanied us specifically commenting on my strength to undergo *dieta* “*as a woman*”.

As an assistant and apprentice in Don Luco's centre in the mestizo community of Jenaro Herrera, the gender imbalance within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism became quickly apparent to me. Indeed, Don Luco and El Maestro's shamanic group and lineage includes no women. As my field-site expanded, I became aware of the lack of female *vegetalistas* in the wider region at the time also. The gender imbalance is reflected in my research, which includes only one female mestizo *ayahuasquera* informant.

As Don Luco's shamanic group represents, mestizo *vegetalismo* knowledge is traditionally passed down the male familial line of descent, from father to son or sometimes grandfather to grandson, or otherwise between male family members. Whenever I asked members of Don Luco's family and wider shamanic group in Jenaro Herrera why there were no female *vegetalistas* in their family, they would usually begin by shrugging their shoulders and saying they didn't know ("*No se.*"). Within this group all *vegetalistas* and *ayahuasqueros* were male but nobody seemed to have given much thought to the lack of female practitioners or could provide concrete reasons for their exclusion. The only consistent reason offered by both men and women in the family was, "*This is the custom here*" (*la costumbre*).

Jolker, Don Luco's eldest son, aged 29 at the time of my fieldwork, is an *ayahuasquero* and shamanic apprentice. He had one son, aged ten, at the time of my fieldwork, and two twin daughters, aged two. Speaking with me one day he expressed his desire to have another son because, he explained, he needed at least two sons to ensure there would be one who would learn shamanic practice. He reminded me that only he had apprenticed under his father, and that El Maestro similarly has several male sons but only one of them had apprenticed with him. "*There's always just one*", he said. "*But what about your daughters?*" I asked. Looking somewhat confused for a moment he replied simply, "*Women don't do it.*". When I pressed him for a reason he replied, "*I don't know*" and hesitating, "*because they don't want to*".

This was typical of responses to my inquiries on this issue. So how did male dominance become *la costumbre*?

Origins...

Don Luco told an origin tale of mestizo *vegetalismo* and of how ayahuasca became a shamanic ally to mestizos during their struggle against Spanish colonisers (1879-1912). My concern is not with the historical accuracy of Don Luco's origin tale but rather, with what it tells us about local insider perceptions of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and its significant features.

Don Luco placed the origins of mestizo *vegetalismo* and ayahuasca shamanism in the rubber boom period (1879 – 1912). He argues that mestizo ayahuasca shamanism developed during the rubber-boom period when knowledge of healing became necessary to protect mestizo communities against “*diseases brought by the Spanish*” and knowledge of *brujería* became necessary to protect them against the colonisers' attack. He explained, “*the white colonisers had guns and our ancestors learnt brujería [sorcery] for defence*”. The ability to heal enabled the first mestizo *vegetalistas* to cure their families and companions of the diseases brought by the colonisers from Europe for which local people had no natural immunity, whilst the ability to do harm through *brujería* enabled them to defend their families and community against the colonisers.

A popular hypothesis within the literature and among more experienced Western ayahuasca drinkers is that mestizos learnt *vegetalismo* practice from indigenous people in the forest (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Chevalier 1982; Lamb 1986; Luna 1986; Beyer 2009; Fotiou 2010). When I relayed this argument to Don Luco thinking it was in line with his own, he surprised me by vehemently stating this was not the case:

“No. Our ancestors did not learn shamanic practice from indigenous people. They learnt it from the spirits of the forest.”

Don Luco went on to explain that spirits of the forest were able to communicate with mestizo rubber tappers due to their altered states considering their exhaustion levels and the harsh conditions they endured. These included the lack of food available to them, the sugar, salt, chilli and other foods the Spanish brought with them, and a lack of female company and therefore, Don Luco suggested, sex, conditions which according to his version of history have formed the basis of the *vegetalismo dieta*. Enduring these conditions for long periods of time, meant that the men became more connected with the forest and began hearing and seeing spirits who communicated with them and began teaching them.

He furthermore argued that the mestizos developed ayahuasca shamanism to do spiritual curing, not simply to use as medicine to treat physical ailments, or for other uses like hunting, describing this development as “*algo mas*” (“something more”) than the indigenous, indicating that mestizo *vegetalismo* is more powerful than indigenous forms of shamanism.²⁴ This positive association of power with mixed blood status is essential for understanding the perspective of mestizo *ayahuasqueros* within my research. Male rubber tappers turned *vegetalistas* thus became the defenders of their communities. The key features of the origin tale I wish to highlight are that it clearly distinguishes mestizo ayahuasca shamanism from indigenous practice; highlights the dual practices of healing and *brujería* at the heart of ayahuasca shamanism and provides a basis for the tradition of male dominance and *la dieta* that pervades mestizo *vegetalismo* to the present day.

Positioning men as the original bearers of the forest spirits’ wisdom, Don Luco’s origin tale provides an historical basis for male dominance of ayahuasca shamanism within mestizo

²⁴ This point also suggests that Don Luco considers the origins of ayahuasca use to preclude mestizo usage, in line with Suárez Álvarez’s (2023) recent theorizing.

society and includes the dual practices of healing and *brujería* and furthermore, highlights the importance and centrality of *dieta* practice within mestizo *vegetalismo* for enabling the formation of relations between practitioners and Master plant spirits, which remains at the core of apprenticeship. Access is therefore essential for the acquirement of shamanic knowledge within this context.

Sexual Abstinence and Strength

La dieta is associated with male strength within mestizo shamanic culture. This correlates with Paul Roscoe's analysis of male initiation and preparatory practices across Melanesian and Amazonian societies in which he identifies a connection between practices of abstinence, specifically sexual abstinence, and the constitution of masculine "strength". Specifically, he argues, 'sexual avoidances are part of the means by which males (and, in certain contexts, perhaps also females) temporarily or more permanently constitute themselves as "strong"' (Roscoe in Gregor and Tuzin 2001: 290). As his analysis suggests, women's participation in such practices is possible but far less common, as is the case within mestizo shamanic tradition.

Ruscoe relates the constitution of male strength to sexual prohibitions (Ruscoe in Gregor and Tunzin 2001:279 -306), I would also argue that sexual prohibitions within *la dieta* are male-orientated. Beyer was taught that sex can cause the loss of power acquired through dieting (Beyer 2009: 58). This is a theme that occurs throughout beliefs surrounding sexual prohibitions within *male* initiation rites across Amazonian and Melanesian societies whereby women's bodies specifically are characterised as consuming of male semen and therefore power (Shapiro 1989, 1995; Conklin in Gregor and Tunzin 2001:27; Roscoe in Gregor and Tunzin 300). Therefore, the exclusion of women from male *dieta* environments can be understood as a protective act through which male strength can be harnessed in seclusion.

Sexual abstinence is not performed in the interests of lowering sexual energy and desires, as within monastic traditions, but instead, as Margaret Jolly has argued in relation to fertility and sexuality in Melanesia and Amazonia, ‘the periodic suppression of desire— palan, fasting from sex and from food—is thought rather to heighten desire and to secure vitality, fertility, and health’ (Jolly in Gregor and Tunzin 2001: 180). This I would argue is also true within mestizo shamanic culture within which shamans are considered as having heightened sexual virility, a point I will return to in Chapter Eight in addressing the contradictions between local and Western beliefs surrounding sexual prohibitions and behaviour in ayahuasca contexts.

Besides tradition (*la costumbre*), the reason typically offered for there being fewer *ayahuasqueras* than *ayahuasqueros*, is that women are less able to engage in *dietas* required for shamanic apprenticeship than men are. It was suggested by several male *ayahuasqueros* throughout my fieldwork that this is because women are not strong enough to complete *dietas*. One of Don Luco’s daughters, also related to El Maestro, was sixteen at the time of my fieldwork. She participated every couple of months or so in ayahuasca ceremonies both with her father and El Maestro and familial or retreat groups. She had first drunk ayahuasca aged nine and exhibited an interest in shamanism and healing more widely, showing great sensitivity towards the needs of Western participants in retreats and occasionally making recommendations of plants they and others should use to heal minor ailments or more serious illnesses. Her talents were also recognised by Lili, Luco’s partner, who began referring to her affectionately as “*bruja*” (female shaman, literally ‘witch’). Yet, when I raised the possibility of her doing a proper apprenticeship, it was argued by Don Luco and his son Jolker that “*she could not manage the dieta.*”

El Espiritista initially suggested I would be unable to manage a plant *dieta* despite the fact I had partaken in several plant *dietas* previously, an argument he ignored and perhaps assumed to be false. Subsequently, he showed disbelief that I had sincerely followed dietary

restrictions whilst in the city having been unable to stay at the centre that month. A female American apprentice of his also told me that “*he wasn’t sure I could tolerate the diets*”, recalling the word typically used, “*aguantar*” meaning ‘endure’. I asked why. “*Because I’m a woman*”, she replied laughing.

It could be argued that these perspectives may have been based more on individual character traits than gender. However, just as the gender-biased argument surrounding *dieta* practice began to emerge through my research evidence, it was made more overt by a Shipibo *ayahuasquero* who spoke on the subject of the gender bias across ayahuasca shamanism in a public arena in a panel I was part of during the *World Ayahuasca Conference* in Girona, 2019. Don Ricardo Amaringo, a well-known *ayahuasquero* with a centre in the Iquitos region, responded to a question about the gender imbalance within ayahuasca shamanism by saying:

“Because men are stronger ... (crowd tuts) look at me, we have more energy no? but women also have energy... We are not all the same no? ... My wife, she is with the medicine but well this doesn’t have much strength, it is lower in energy, so she can’t enter the level of the camp of shamanism. So, women are strong, but men diet well, diet well, no? but women not really. They can’t diet like this how men diet. Because it is strong /difficult, and women can’t endure the diet.”

Clarifying and defending his response for the audience, who were audibly disapproving, Ricardo Amaringo’s American apprentice, Dr. Joe Tafur, emphasized that this is the view within Shipibo culture, that the diet is very difficult and usually women “*don’t go for it*”. In what follows I suggest that women “*don’t go for it*” or “*don’t want to*” as Jolker also suggested, because *la dieta* is traditionally a male-orientated practice connected with the forest, a male dominated domain within mestizo (and modern Shipibo) culture.

The Forest as Male Domain

Mestizo Amazonian communities exhibit gendered divisions of labour whereby women take care of the domestic sphere involving childcare and care of the household, while men occupy an outward, public-facing, provider role that mostly includes procuring food, shelter and money for the family. This division is visible in commonplace local lifestyles and is associated with living in a settlement in a tropical forest environment.

Although globalisation and modernisation has created new roles, activities associated with the forest – namely particular types of hunting and fishing, and shamanism – are tasks almost exclusively conducted by men. While there are few skilled hunters in Jenaro Herrera, it is a highly valued and very much respected skill. Some of the best hunters in the town are *vegetalistas*, perhaps because of their greater knowledge of and connection to the forest in comparison to others. The responsibility for protecting and perpetuating mestizo *vegetalismo*²⁵ knowledge in the community lies with male youth in the shamanic families. The connection between hunting and shamanism and their relation to predation and seduction is inscribed in the anthropological literature (Alexiades 1999; Barbira-Freedman 2010; Costa 2010; DeCastro 1998, 2019; Fausto 1999, 2012; Peluso 2004), and these practices clearly associated with the male forest domain. Parallels can be drawn between the spirit masters of game animals which provide support to hunters, and the spirit masters of teacher plants that provide support to shamans known as ‘allies’ or more usually *ayudantes* referring to their role as ‘helpers’ or ‘assistants’, and the seduction practices used to engage in relations with these master spirits (Barbira-Freedman 2010). Hunters engage in seduction practices to attract their prey and disguise their ‘humanness’ especially scent, for example covering their bodies with *ayahuma* fruit pulp, as was described to me by Jolker, a skilled hunter, or using tobacco

²⁵ See Barbira-Freedman (1999) for an analysis on the rise of *vegetalismo* as a medical system in the Peruvian Amazon.

smoke in a similar way, as described by Barbira-Freedman (2010). Engaging in *dieta* practice involving sexual and dietary prohibitions has similar effects, disguising one's humanness and affecting the body (and its odours) so that the shamanic apprentice can gain access to the spirit world.

The predatory imagery of shamanism is furthermore drawn from hunting and warfare whereby healing and harming involves the projection and removal of pathogenic darts (Barbira-Freedman 2010). In both hunting and shamanism Daniela Peluso has discussed how the positionality and interrelationships of the roles of predator, prey and ally between humans and non-human others are shifting on an ongoing and contingent basis (Peluso 2014, 2021). Such fluid positionality can be seen in Jenaro Herrera within the play of shamanic warfare whereby rival shamans can occupy the positions of attacker, defender or ally in turn. These interactions also often entail the 'stealing' of shamanic allies who therefore become enemies for the shaman with whom they were previously allied. The dominant relations between predation and seduction are ingrained within the symbolism of hunting and shamanism and these models of relating to animal, plant and spirit entities are predominantly verbalized using a male viewpoint. Thus, the archetypes of man the hunter and man the shaman are inherently connected through the practices and imagery of predation and seduction and their association with the forest realm (Siskind 1973).

Male dominance of the forest realm is also represented within Amazonian folklore. One of the most common Amazonian folkloric creatures, of which stories are often told by local people in the Loreto region, is the male spirit Chuyachaki, variably referred to as the guardian or demon of the forest. According to Amazonian stories, Chuyachacki is a mischievous spirit, often depicted in sinister tales in which he is always engaged in trickery, usually involving the stealing of women and children. This occurs when Chuyachaki's territory marked by 'gardens' (*chakras*) that appear as cultivated areas in the otherwise wild jungle landscape, is

encroached by humans. Chuyachaki can appear in many forms but most often he takes the form of a close family member, usually a handsome male in the stories I was told, in order to lure unsuspecting victims into the forest. He is identifiable by his feet, one of which is always turned backwards and sometimes described as a hoof, giving him his other name, ‘the devil of the forest’ (“*el diablo de la selva*”).

In one of the tales I was told by a local *vegetalista*, a woman was left by her husband in their forest *tambo* (small hut) at night whilst he went hunting. Upon awaking to a loud noise, she saw a man in the forest and ventured out believing it to be her husband calling for her to come. She was lured deeper and deeper until her husband returned to the *tambo* to find her missing and only a spectre of her spirit circling high above the bed. Knowing Chuyachaki must have taken her and he only had so much time before she was lost to him forever in the act of mating, he had to find and face Chuyachaki and beat him in a fight in order to win her back.

In another tale told, the grandmother of a local man from a community nearby Iquitos vanished one day whilst out walking with his grandfather in the forest. He went out with a search party of men with guns to find her but they could find no traces of where she’d been. Finally, they came across a local man who pointed them in the direction of the chuyachaki community. They eventually found his grandmother weathered and scarred from the forest on an island in the middle of a river, which he said she could never have walked or swum to. She had been missing for three days and could not remember what had happened, only that she had been sitting and eating there with two people over a fire. These were spirits, the man explained.

As these examples convey, the chuyachaki myths serve to portray men in the role of “*mastering the spirits*”, the role of the shaman. Moreover, the spirits of the forest in these

examples from which *vegetalismo* knowledge and practice is primarily learned through the practice of *la dieta*. It is more challenging for women to gain access to such practices because of gendered domains of knowledge and practices within mestizo Amazonian communities. Furthermore, these myths express and reinforce beliefs about women's vulnerability in the forest and their need for male protection. They also allude to the possibility of rape in the forest, as in the first tale recalled here, a genuine risk from which women are typically perceived of as being protected from through their connections with familial men. As mentioned in the previous chapter, female shamanic practitioners in my research also connected the threat of rape in the male dominated domain of shamanism (closely associated with the forest) with a lack of female practitioners, showing how female apprentices do not necessarily feel protected by male *maestros*, just as *La Doctora*, whose male *maestros* attempted to rape her, was not.

Yet, gendered domains within mestizo communities like Jenaro Herrera mean women don't hunt or build shelter, making undergoing a *dieta* in the forest without the help of a man practically impossible for women.

Childbearing, Menstruation and Reproductive Power

Conducting *dietas* are often impractical for women due to their childbearing and childcare responsibilities (which often includes nursing). The responsibility of caring for babies and young children falls almost exclusively with mothers and female relatives within mestizo communities making the possibility of conducting *dietas* whilst caring for babies and children unrealistic. Many local women have their first child in their mid to late teens, the same age that a young man might begin a shamanic apprenticeship. They are likely to have several more during the rest of their fertile years. When ayahuasca is drunk by women during pregnancy in Jenaro Herrera it is only in small amounts usually once or twice during

the pregnancy, which is insufficient for a practicing apprentice who would drink monthly at least, and sometimes several nights in a row depending on their current practice and progress. Furthermore, dieting is discouraged both during and following pregnancy when the baby is breast-feeding, which means under-going *dietas* during these times is not possible.

A local female apprentice suggested that conducting *dietas* whilst living with a male partner is not easy because “*when you are young you have a husband, or you have a partner or you have a boyfriend and you don’t want to diet, and the man sometimes if you do he almost gets annoyed*”. She argued that it is more usual for women to practice shamanism when they are older and have more freedom to do so. Her position implies that due to gender dynamics within Amazonian partnerships typically, men are freer to do so when younger. Descola has indicated the same for the Achuar, stating that women ‘may also become shamans, although the most powerful among them are usually widows; contrary to what obtains among their male counterparts, full dedication to their shamanistic careers appears to be incompatible with a normal married life’ (Descola in Gregor and Tuzin 2001: 100).

The exclusion of menstruating women or women of menstruating age from male *dieta* environments provides some basis for the belief that women are not suited to shamanic practice during their younger, fertile years (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Luna 1986), and are more likely to take up shamanic practice during menopause (Barbira-Freedman 2010:146). There were no overt rules about women’s exclusion from mestizo *vegetalismo* and ayahuasca shamanism during fertile years among practitioners within my research, but it is not usual or allowed according to many practitioners for women to accompany men to the forest during *dietas* due largely to sexual prohibitions and beliefs around menstruation.

Belaunde and McCallum (2023) have argued that ‘to study shamanism as though it existed outside men and women’s practices of blood management is to curtail its scope’ (2023:

562). Indicating that menstruation is often conceptualised as a ‘snake-like shedding of women’s “skin-body”’ (*ibid.*: 560) they suggest that blood can be considered in Amazonia as a kind of ‘psychoactive flow’ with the capacity to connect and enable communication between human and non - human beings in the cosmos, and therefore is comparable to the effects of ingesting powerful plants in Amazonian shamanism (*ibid.* :561). According to this analysis, they propose that whether women participate in shamanism or not, Amazonian shamanism should be conceptualized as a ‘shamanic-reproductive’ complex.,

Francoise Barbira-Freedman (2010) also argues, based on her fieldwork with Lamista people, that male shamanic initiation and practices mirror female reproductive capabilities. Indicating how ‘shamanic songs allude to the ways in which male shamans emulate women’s reproductive powers’ (Barbira-Freedman 2010:182), she suggests that whereas male practitioners must incorporate female reproductive powers, female practitioners have to suppress them. These connections were not overt in my research evidence but a parallel between male shamanic initiation practices and female reproductive capacities does seem to exist in the sense that these processes can be understood as equivalent and interconnected processes within mestizo Amazonian culture.

In order to engage in the “*camp of shamanism*” Amazonian women have to challenge traditional gender roles and power relations. This necessitates great strength of character. It is perhaps unsurprising then that female shamans are often believed to be stronger than male practitioners, as other anthropologists have indicted for Amazonian contexts (Barbira-Freedman 2010:135; Fortis 2013; Mezzenzana 2018). Among the Runa Mezzenzana explains that women’s greater capacity for shamanic prowess is directly connected with their belief that women have multiple souls whereas men only have one; for this reason, among the Runa ‘women have always been discouraged from becoming shamans: their many souls represented a tremendous, yet dangerous advantage in shamanic warfare. With

an excess of souls, women could have been much stronger than men in their visions and powers' (Mezzenzana 2018: 18). While specific reasons were not usually offered by mestizos in my research, the belief that women have the capacity to be stronger shamans than men was a theme that arose throughout my fieldwork. Don Luco expressed contradictory opinions depending, it seemed, on his mood and feelings towards me as his female assistant/apprentice, but he usually said that women have the potential to become more powerful shamans.

El Espiritista similarly argued that "*the woman is stronger than the man in shamanism*" and emphasised women's connection to the Earth (*la tierra*). The Earth is not synonymous with 'Nature' within mestizo Amazonian perspectives in my research but rather, Nature typically divided into four elements, with earth and water being associated with women, and air (or 'wind') and fire (or 'light') associated with men. This point perhaps deserves greater scholarly attention but it is significant to note for the purposes of this dissertation that Nature is not feminized as a concept and opposed with Culture, as is typical within Western perspectives (Ortner 1972).

As outlined in this section, my research evidence suggests that whilst women's shamanic power may be quite commonly alluded to, it is much more rarely given the opportunity to manifest in the realm of mestizo *vegetalismo* and ayahuasca shamanism than male shamanic agency. This is due to barriers to women participating in shamanism including childbearing responsibilities, norms re family/intimate relationships, menstruation taboos, and the symbolic association between virility and hunting.. The suppression of female shamanic agency through social and symbolic means could also be understood as a reaction to fear of women's innate potential power. Sexual abuse of female apprentices could also be understood in this context.

Male bias is reflected in the hierarchies within mestizo shamanism and the related ayahuasca industry, as described in the previous chapter. However, the fading of the menstruation taboo and adaptations of *dieta* practice due to urbanisation and westernisation have enabled the greater participation of women in shamanic apprenticeship.

Adaptations of *La Dieta*

Urban diets are conducted in urban areas – usually in isolated or semi-isolated settings – whilst social diets are conducted in more social environments whereby apprentices can continue with much of their everyday lives whilst following *dieta* restrictions, however with limited or sometimes no close physical contact with other people. For example, Don Ricardo Amaringo’s apprentice Dr. Joe Tafur, an American M.D. and *ayahuasquero*, conducted *dietas* this way, as he describes in his book on Amazonian shamanism, *The Fellowship of the River: A Medical Doctor’s Exploration into Traditional Amazonian Plant Medicine* (Tafur & Maté 2017). It is not uncommon to see people walking around Iquitos with their skin dyed blue, having used the local natural plant dye, *huito*, said to provide protection, and used also to signal to others that they are ‘in diet’ to avoid issues with human contact. The development of ‘the urban *dieta*’ and ‘social *dieta*’ are key examples of the impacts of urbanisation on *vegetalismo* practice that have clearly made *dieta* practice more accessible for Westerners without the skills to conduct *dieta* alone in forest environments.

Gearin and Labate suggest that urban diets and social diets have arisen in recent years to cater for Western participants and apprentices (Gearin & Labate 2018). My research suggests that these adaptations are perhaps less recent and Western orientated than this perspective conveys. Whilst it is not usually considered as effective, it is quite common within mestizo communities for mestizo practitioners to diet in urban or semi-urban

environments, for instance in the community of Jenaro Herrera as Don Luco, El Maestro and apprentices sometimes did. Whether influenced by Western participation or features of globalisation, or indeed both, these variations on ‘traditional’ forest practice have made Westerners’ engagement in ayahuasca shamanism more feasible. These adaptations of traditional *dieta* practice have also made way for the greater participation of women, both local as well as Western in shamanic apprenticeship.

In my research, mestizo *ayahuasquera* and *oracionista* La Doctora, who conducted the majority of her apprenticeship in the city of Iquitos is evidence of this development: she recalls walking the streets of Iquitos in trance whilst singing *oraciones* (prayers) and receiving spiritual knowledge and guidance, apparently without any food for three months during her initiation. Ayahuasca is also considered more accessible for female practitioners than strong tree medicine as Barbira- Freedman (2010) indicates. Thus, this development arguably makes way for more female practitioners within mestizo communities who would usually be discouraged from following the *palero vegetalista* path working with particularly strong trees considered too strong (“*demasiado fuerte*”) for women to master.

The introduction of the ‘tourist diet’, as described in the previous chapter, is a key development that has created greater access to shamanic knowledge for Westerners and also women, without the skills to endure *dietas* alone in forest environments. Some local *ayahuasqueros* and *vegetalistas* have also adapted their usual practices to make way for the inclusion of *gringa* apprentices and participants.

Gringa Apprentices and Participants

During the *dietas* I engaged in during my fieldwork, I was sometimes accompanied by other Western women, but local women did not join us and never accompanied a male group of *dieteros* at other times to my knowledge. As Western females we were very much dependent

on our male companions in *dieta* contexts due to our lack of forest survival skills. They assembled our shelter, fished each day for our food, and hunted at night. Our enthusiasm to learn and attempts to help with manual tasks were greeted with resistance. For instance, during one *dieta*, we became trapped in the river trying to reach our desired location due to low water levels and fallen tree trunks. Being only five people, my female companion and I tried to assist in helping to move the boat and obstacles in our way but were instructed to stay still. On the same trip, my female companion became frustrated that her interest in hunting was ignored, despite being experienced in hunting in the U.S. At the end of this *dieta* on our way home to the lodge I requested Luco's son Jolker teach me how to drive the boat and commented when steering it that I felt like a real Amazonian woman. "*The women here don't drive*", he corrected me. Whilst this grated somewhat, it is true that getting to our location by boat and surviving comfortably in the forest alone would have been extremely difficult if not impossible without our male companions. The same would be true for mestizo women without the necessary skills to survive for a week in this forest environment. The fact that I was allowed to drive at least on this occasion reflects the fact that *gringas* occupy a rather unique position in the local culture. Considering gendered and cultural power dynamics, whereby white people are conceived as having more economic and social power than Amazonians (Peluso 2016), *gringas* present a kind of paradox - in being women, yet also being white. This allows them a certain amount of freedom to negotiate the boundaries of traditional Amazonian domains, being outside the structures of kinship and culture that organise local communities. Therefore, they can enter into apprenticeships with local *ayahuasqueros* and other local specialists such as *tobaqueros*, as is also common, without great difficulty.

Like myself at the time of fieldwork (or at least how I was perceived by local people), most *gringas* partaking in apprenticeships or long-term shamanic practice in the region do not

have strong familial responsibilities and commitments. When I became pregnant towards the end of my research, I was less able to engage in shamanic practice in consequence. Two experienced Western *ayahuasqueras* that work in the region do have young children but they both completed their shamanic apprenticeship before becoming mothers. One of these women chose to continue practicing as usual during pregnancy engaging in many ayahuasca ceremonies and drinking her usual dosage of ayahuasca, a decision that would not be usual according to traditional mestizo practice. As the examples discussed show, the rise of Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism has led to developments of traditional practice that have enabled and indeed been shaped by the participation of *gringas*.

As well as allowing menstruating women to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies, as all mestizo shamans in my research did, some mestizo *ayahuasqueros* among my research participants even allowed menstruating women into otherwise male *dieta* environments. While this is by no means an accepted course of action for all mestizo practitioners, it is a clear example of how *dieta* rules have been made much more flexible by some to enable the inclusion of *gringa* participants. The greater involvement of *gringas* in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and the taking of *gringa* apprentices seems also to be connected with rising demand for female shamanic practitioners, especially to accommodate the needs of growing numbers of Western female participants, who would ideally have female assistance through processes of cleansing and purification, as was expressed by Don Luco.

Gringa apprentices and *ayahuasqueras* are now reasonably commonplace within the ayahuasca community, although they do not occupy very prominent positions within the ayahuasca industry, as outlined previously. The involvement of *gringa* apprentices and practitioners in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, I believe, can be partly understood as a side

effect of the global Feminist movement, a movement which has affected Western countries more than others, giving rise to birth control and greater independence for women, including greater freedom to travel alone.

Conclusion

My analysis of the gender bias amongst practitioners reveals that both *curanderismo* (healing) and *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) are related to male shamanic agency within mestizo tradition, as communicated in Don Luco's origin tale in which male rubber tappers became defenders of their community through acquiring knowledge of both *brujería* and *curanderismo* in relation with the spirits of the forest. This is in contrast to the gendered stereotypes of spheres of shamanic practice typically held by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism, whereby healing is associated with the feminine and by extension with female practitioners.

As I have discussed, gendered domains in mestizo Amazonian communities and related cultural beliefs surrounding menstruation, reproduction and childrearing have largely excluded women from male *dieta* environments and therefore mestizo *vegetalismo* practice, despite their quite widespread reputation for being potentially more powerful shamans within mestizo culture. I suggest that the threat of sexual abuse at the hands of male shamans has also acted as a deterrent against female participation at the apprentice/practitioner level. Yet adaptations of *la dieta* and Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism involving Feminist influences have made way for the inclusion of more female participants, apprentices and *ayahuasqueras*.

A related phenomenon is the emphasis on and commodification of "Mother Ayahuasca" in contemporary Westernized ayahuasca contexts. Indeed, at the level of cosmology, an attraction to and preference for 'the feminine', influenced by third-wave Feminism

(Papaspyrou, Baldini, & Luke 2019) and Ecofeminist concepts (e.g. Plumwood 1993; Shiva 2020a, 2020b) is represented by what I refer to as the rise of “Mother Ayahuasca” within global ayahuasca shamanism and the touristic ayahuasca industry, as the following chapter explores.

Chapter Five: The Rise of “Mother Ayahuasca”

Across the ayahuasca-using community in Iquitos, as well as elsewhere, the spirit of ayahuasca is commonly referred to as “*Mother Ayahuasca*” or in Spanish as “*Madre Ayahuasca*”. The characterisation of ayahuasca as a mother spirit is adopted by local as well as Western practitioners working within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos and reflected in the names of some ayahuasca centres in the region, such as *AyaMadre* and *Mama Mystica*.

Within Western ayahuasca circles it is also common for ayahuasca to be referred to as “*Grandmother Ayahuasca*” (Campos et. al. 2011; Gearin 2016; Pinchbeck & Rokhlin 2019) but I never heard this use in the Iquitos context. ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ is typically considered to be the female spirit of the ayahuasca vine by my informants. In line with the shape of the ayahuasca vine, it is said that ‘she’ often appears as an anaconda in ayahuasca visions, an image popularised in the West partly by anthropologist Jeremy Narby’s, *The Cosmic Serpent* (1999). Much scholarship has noted this tendency for indigenous and local peoples to view ayahuasca as mostly female but has been careful to note that this is not exclusively the case (Barbira-Friedman 2010; Peluso 2014; Gearin 2022)

Yet the personification of ayahuasca as a feminine spirit is a taken for granted reality within Western ayahuasca circles, as also echoed within some contemporary scholarship (Funder 2021, MesturiniCappo 2018). However, anthropological evidence reveals that ‘the feminization of ayahuasca’ (Fotiou 2014) is not universal across contexts and cultures but rather, has become pronounced through Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism and the growth of the ayahuasca industry. In this chapter I argue that representations of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ within the commercial industry and socialisation within retreat contexts and the wider ayahuasca community in Iquitos have influenced Western participants to relate to ayahuasca as a wholly benevolent healing mother entity, and furthermore, as an omniscient

being with purely positive agency. This commodified interpretation of ayahuasca conflicts with mestizo perspectives of ayahuasca as a much more ambiguous entity.

Ethnological Evidence

Beliefs vary about the gender of the spirit of the ayahuasca vine and brew across ayahuasca using groups. *Yagé*, the Colombian equivalent of ayahuasca, is usually considered to have a male spirit (Weiskopf 2005). Within the Santo Daime religion, the vine (*jagube*) is usually considered as a masculine element of the brew and the leaf (*rainha*, or queen) of chacruna or other DMT containing plant as a feminine element (Highpine 2013). Similarly, the Ashaninka perceive the ayahuasca spirit as male and the spirit of chacruna as female (Bustos 2008). It has been suggested by some ayahuasca scholars that most indigenous peoples of the Amazon hold this view (Grob et al, 1996; McKenna, Callaway & Grob, 1998; Narby, 1999; Mijares & Fotiou 2015). Yet, this is a generalisation that probably cannot be applied to all ayahuasca using indigenous groups. Some scholars have emphasised the importance of gender complementarity within sacred plant- based traditions in Latin America (Alexiades, M. N. 2000; Mijares & Fotiou 2015). Yet, other Amazonian scholars have argued that the gendering of plants would have mostly been introduced through the introduction of the Spanish language to Amazonian regions during colonisation.²⁶

Amongst the Napo Runa, an Amazonian community on the Napo River in Ecuador regarded by many as the ancestors of ayahuasca shamanism, the ayahuasca vine is usually called “*the mother of all plants*” or “*Mama Ayahuasca*” (Highpine 2013), although it is not clear how long this characterisation has been used. The Napo Runa are connected geographically and culturally, due to their mixed descent, to mestizo ayahuasca using communities of the Upper

²⁶ Personal communication with Daniela Peluso.

Amazon Basin and therefore may have influenced perceptions of the ayahuasca spirit gender in the Iquitos region (Highpine 2013).

My research evidence suggests that ayahuasca's personification as a feminine healing spirit has only become engrained in ayahuasca culture since the 1980s, reflected by contemporary references (e.g. Harris 2017; Indesteege 2018; Pinchbeck & Rokhlin 2019) but not prominent in earlier works (e.g. Spruce 1908; Ginsberg & Burroughs 1963; Lamb 1971; Dobkin de Rios 1972,1992; McKenna D & T 1975; Schultes 1976; Luna 1986; Taussig 1987). One of my research participants, Peter Gorman, a seasoned ayahuasca drinker, writer and one of the pioneers of 'ayahuasca tourism' in the Iquitos region, who has been bringing groups to the late Master shaman of Don Luco's shamanic lineage since the 1980s, and to this day, his son, (in Jenaro Herrera) recalled in an interview that ayahuasca was not referred to as 'Mother Ayahuasca' when he first started drinking with local *ayahuasqueros* in the Iquitos region during the 1980s. In his book *Ayahuasca in My Blood* the spirit of ayahuasca first appears in his visions as a male figure wearing a cowboy hat (Gorman 2010). Furthermore, ayahuasca was initially promoted to Gorman as an "interesting experience" rather than a healing remedy or medicine. Within the local context in Iquitos ayahuasca is still typically referred to as "*la purga*" ("the purge"), referring to its purgative effects, and in contrast to "*medicina*", a neutral term, fitting with its ambiguous usage historically as both poison and remedy (Dobkin de Rios 1972, 1992; Beyer 2009; Brabec de Mori 2014).

Thus, whilst it is generally assumed by many Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism that the personification of ayahuasca as a mother spirit is ancient, evidence suggests that this characterisation may only have been adopted relatively recently, or at least has become much more pronounced due to the influence of Western participants in ayahuasca based practice during the past forty or so years with the rise of the ayahuasca industry, involving increased emphasis on ayahuasca's healing capabilities, which have been associated with its femininity.

‘The Feminization of Ayahuasca’

Based on her research in Iquitos, Fotiou has described what she refers to as the ‘feminization of ayahuasca’ in the context of Western usage. She indicates that among ‘mestizo shamans and tourists alike’ ayahuasca is ‘generally perceived as a female and maternal spirit... often described as a “tough” but loving mother’ having ‘qualities, traditionally related to femininity’, namely, its capacity to ‘develop intuition and connection to nature and all things spiritual and sacred’ (Fotiou 2014: 171-2). This analysis applies also to touristic settings within my research within which descriptions of ayahuasca emphasize its healing capabilities.

Healing through the ayahuasca experience is largely associated with the body, involving physical purging, emotional release, and confrontation with the unconscious as well as inner and spiritual realms. While psychotherapy has become incorporated into ayahuasca healing environments through Western influence (Labate 2014), purging, which can manifest as vomiting, defecating, shaking, crying, yawning, and other bodily processes, is of central importance within therapeutic ayahuasca use (Fotiou & Gearin 2019). Experienced practitioners and participants emphasise that healing takes place *through the body*, not the mind. This healing process involves the shifting of “heavy” or “dark” energies within the body using ayahuasca as a catalyst and guide. The body, emotion and the unconscious are usually conceptualised as ‘feminine’ and opposed with the conscious mind and rationality, conversely conceptualised as ‘male’ within Western psychedelic circles and the wider counterculture (Papaspyrou, Baldini, & Luke 2019). For this reason, I suggest that ayahuasca “feels” feminine for Western participants. For example, a European apprentice told me, “*I always felt her as feminine...I never really saw her though it’s just how she feels.*”

As well as being considered a nurturing mother spirit, ‘she’ is typically considered by Western participants to be a keen disciplinarian who provides harsh but accurate appraisals of

her children or patients in the interest of healing. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear a Westerner in the Iquitos community saying that they “got [their] ass kicked by Mother Aya last night”. This can refer to both the visionary effects of the brew, as well as the purgative effects, which can be extreme in some cases. Yet this is considered necessary for “the healing process” of the individual involving the release of emotional as well as physical “baggage” or “blockages”.

Fotiou’s analysis also implies a connection between ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ and ‘Mother Earth’ for Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism, as communicated with an example she shares from an ayahuasca retreat website marketing a retreat ‘offering ceremonies exclusively run by female healers-curanderas (working with Mother Ayahuasca, connecting to Mother Earth)’ (Fotiou 2014: 174, quoting *The Temple of the Way of the Light* website). Similarly, this connection is implied in Alex Gearin’s analysis of the Western adoption of ayahuasca shamanism as ‘a form of “cultural critique” (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) against urbanization, materialism, environmental destruction, and consumer capitalism’ by a growing subculture seeking re-connection with “Good Mother Nature” (Gearin 2016).

Within my research this connection was more overt, with ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ considered by some of my research participants as the personification of Mother Earth, or Mother Nature. For example, a 42 -year -old yoga instructor and ayahuasca retreat participant from Hungary, said about her life before ayahuasca, “*I felt I had lost that connection to Nature or I never really had it or it was never so deep.*” One year on from her ayahuasca retreat she reflected in an interview on how ayahuasca had helped her to reconnect with Nature. Re-calling her ayahuasca ceremonies, she said, “*I felt like Mother Nature is talking to me or Mother Ayahuasca is talking to me.*” It is usual for ceremonial participants to describe having communications with Mother Ayahuasca for months and even years following their ceremonial experiences. As this participant went on to explain, “*I know she is still there and*

she looks after me somehow, so Mother Nature is with me. I just feel so protected.” The spiritual nature of the relationship that is formed between ceremonial participants and ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ points to a widely held belief amongst Western ayahuasca drinkers in Iquitos that Western civilisation’s movement away from Nature is connected or perhaps even responsible for its spiritual impoverishment and, in parallel, that connection with Nature is synonymous with spiritual connection. Or, as this participant suggested, “*Mother Earth, it’s the Universe, it’s God really.*”

Earth-based spirituality centred on devotion to a sentient ‘Mother Earth’, or Gaia (Lovelock 1979), has become popular within the countercultural movement since the 1960s, which has arisen partly as a reaction to the ecological crisis, understood within this movement as caused by the growth of modern industrial, and specifically patriarchal society, entailing the domination of Nature by Mankind (Ortner 1972; D’Eaubonne 1974; Merchant 1980; Miles & Shiva 1993; Shiva 2020a, 2020b). Although it is a modern phenomenon, there is a widespread sense across the contemporary spiritual movement that the current popularity of earth based spiritual practices is a *return* to more historical ways of being, necessary for the survival of humankind, and perhaps even the Earth itself (Partridge 2004; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Taylor 2010). Ayahuasca shamanism, along with other psychedelic shamanism, is part of this contemporary “revival. Thus, the spirit of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ can be seen as a fitting central figure for the Western seekers’ cultural revolt and representative for Mother Earth.

Indeed, Mother Ayahuasca is perceived by many Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism as a spiritual messenger of the Earth, calling out to the people of the world to “wake up” before it is too late. Indeed, 7% of retreat participants in my research sample said they had received such a “calling” from Mother Ayahuasca. Callings usually entail a strange sequence of events or Jungian synchronicities through which the person is introduced to

ayahuasca: through people they meet, events, articles they read, and vivid dreams, for example. In almost all cases references to ayahuasca, having previously been non-existent, become more frequent in the person's life. This often occurs following personal crisis that motivates a 'spiritual quest' and search for self-healing and growth through which the spirit of ayahuasca is understood as a guide. Yet, Ayahuasca's "calling" goes beyond the personal. As the calling motif suggests, much of ayahuasca's Western audience is united by their shared sense of having a mission or purpose that goes beyond personal desires. This mission entails being part of the movement that wishes to restore harmony between humankind and 'Mother Earth' in the context of ecological and spiritual crisis. Considering this, I propose that 'her' perceived characterisation as a "tough but loving mother" is also related to her perceived implicit connection with Mother Earth and the sense of urgency associated with Mother Earth's destruction and potential redemption.

Fotiou (2014) describes how 'shamanic practices and the ancients from around the world' have been connected with earth-based spirituality involving reverence for 'the Mother' as evidenced in the narratives of retreat centre websites. She is critical of the oversimplification of indigenous shamanism this kind of discourse entails, arguing that while it 'attempts to reverse essentialist gender discourse and bring "feminine" qualities into the mainstream by perceiving them as positive...certain ways of gendering the spirit world, as the case of ayahuasca shows, only affirm ideologies of separate gender spheres and the obvious power relations between them – effects that might not have been there previously or might even be the result of Western influence', and which risk 'perpetuating the same essentialist discourses and the 'further marginalization of indigenous knowledge' (Ibid. 175).

. At least one healer and their apprentice in Fotiou's research argued that the ayahuasca spirit is actually male; she suggests that this evidence along with male dominance of the practice and the prevalence of shamanic warfare and sorcery in ayahuasca shamanism challenges

feminized depictions of ayahuasca (Fotiou 2014: 172). Her argument here is problematic considering its inherent acceptance of shamanic warfare and sorcery as ‘male’ aspects of practice in contrast to her subsequent challenge to ‘ideologies of gendered spheres’.

However, these characterisations of gendered spheres are representative of typical Western perspectives. I would argue that the pronounced feminization of ayahuasca has indeed been orchestrated, or at least encouraged by the commercial industry, in an effort to hide *brujería* and shamanic warfare elements of practice and emphasize healing elements to the Western audience.

Highlighting the use of two crucial plants (ayahuasca and chacruna or other DMT containing plants) within the ayahuasca brew and indicating that several of her informants argued that one element of the brew is male (usually the ayahuasca vine) and the other female (usually chacruna), Fotiou proposes our focus be shifted on to the ‘*complementarity of genders*’, which she argues is ‘closer to the indigenous worldview’ (Fotiou *ibid.*, 176). In line with existing literature on the matter, Fotiou’s argument still adheres to the essentialising conception of the ayahuasca vine and other plants as being *either* female or male, which my research challenges.

Beyond Duality: The Gendered Flexibility of Ayahuasca

My most trusted and experienced informants - the mestizo *ayahuasqueros* and their apprentices with whom I worked and conducted the majority of my research - asserted that ayahuasca and other plants all have both male and female spirits and are capable of taking male or female forms. Don Luco suggested that sometimes one aspect is more dominant but that either part may reveal itself. The possibility of ayahuasca manifesting in an androgynous form was also considered possible by the *ayahuasqueros* in my research, but examples were not discussed throughout my fieldwork. Mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in my research argued that

plant spirits will appear in forms that make sense to you and that are appealing to you, often in animal or human form of different genders.

El Espiritista is apparently better acquainted with the male spirit of ayahuasca than the female aspect, which he sees as an “*abuelito*” (little grandfather). His Western apprentice also saw the male spirit of ayahuasca as “*a little old man*”. A “*little old man*” would presumably be unrecognisable as the spirit of ayahuasca for most Western ceremonial participants. Yet the male spirit is able to be recognised by experienced *ayahuasqueros*. El Espiritista’s apprentice explained that how ayahuasca manifests is dependent on an individual’s preferences, needs and expectations:

“Like with all the plants and like ourselves, we have both male and female in us, they do in them...so the side that presents itself is the side that needs to present itself at that particular moment in time for whatever reason... I also think though that people get too hung up on the sacred feminine thing and they go in with that preconception you know, that can impact things as well.”

Of great interest is the comparison *El Espiritista*’s apprentice makes between plants and people arguing that “*we have both male and female in us*” also. It is quite typically said that ayahuasca is a “mirror of the soul” and presents us with a reflection of our own “nature”. Experienced Western ayahuasca drinkers and local practitioners often refer to feminine (*feminine*) and masculine (*masculino*) aspects within human beings as well as plants and other beings. Indeed, within Westernized ayahuasca settings in the ayahuasca industry, part of the “healing process” for an individual is sometimes conceptualised by *ayahuasqueros* and facilitators as a process of balancing male and female aspects, or masculine and feminine energies within the person. In this context the perception of ayahuasca and other plant spirits as being both male and female, or containing both male and female parts, represents a challenge to essentialised conceptions of gender within human beings, and, I would suggest, the appropriation of this perspective, also reflects a re-working of

understandings of gender in process amongst experienced Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism.

Through his acknowledgement of “*the sacred feminine thing*”, El Espiritista’s apprentice implies that for most Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism, the ayahuasca spirit is female. While suggesting that ayahuasca manifests in line with participants’ needs, his explanation also highlights the importance of preconceptions in shaping participants’ experiences and implies that these preconceptions are somehow limiting in that people are “*too hung up*” on them. Yet, although *maestros* may teach their apprentices and more experienced ayahuasca drinkers about the gendered flexibility of plant spirits within Amazonian shamanism, this information is rarely shared with ceremonial and retreat participants.

El Espiritista’s apprentice went on to explain that he and his *maestro* focus on Mother Ayahuasca in the presence of ayahuasca retreat attendees because, “*that’s what people want to hear.*” This he suggested, may better serve the needs of the ceremonial or retreat participants to whom further information about the spirit of ayahuasca may be confusing and unhelpful: most people who participate in ayahuasca ceremonies and retreats in the region are transient visitors and so with limited time, he argued, “*why delve into things that aren’t really relevant to them and probably won’t help them?*” Of course, this approach is also preferable for commercial reasons as retreat centres are engaged in selling the vision or brand of Mother Ayahuasca. In what follows I intend to elucidate the process of socialisation that takes place within ayahuasca retreat settings and the wider ayahuasca community through which Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism are taught to relate to and perceive the spirit of ‘Mother Ayahuasca.’

Encounters with Mother Ayahuasca

Mother Ayahuasca first appeared to me in a vision as a beautiful and colourful half woman/half anaconda figure emerging from and dancing over an Amazonian river. Yet this first clear encounter with Mother Ayahuasca occurred months after I first began participating in ceremonies. I had been frustrated by the lack of such encounters I had during my initial ayahuasca ceremonies. This was a spectacular 3D visionary experience within which I was engulfed; it felt like Mother Ayahuasca was rewarding me for waiting by showing herself in her full colour, beauty and power... but then again, could I really be sure it was her or that she existed?

When I first arrived in Iquitos as an ayahuasca novice during the summer of 2014, my knowledge of ayahuasca was limited to what I had learned about it through reading a few esoteric books that emphasised ayahuasca's powerful psychedelic qualities and use as a healing 'medicine' with the capacity to enable 'spiritual' experiences (e.g. Pinchbeck 2002). Having had only one or two such experiences that I could remember in my life, I was intrigued by this potential and felt in need of some kind of healing and guidance at the time that came from beyond my comfort zone. I had no contacts with anyone who had drunk ayahuasca beyond the centre owner whom I had communicated with via email to arrange my volunteering position. As well as being required to fill out a retreat participant questionnaire and being instructed to follow a strict 'ayahuasca diet', I was encouraged to give thought to my intentions with "*the medicine*," as it was referred to by him in our communication, during the months preceding the ceremonies in which I would partake. As well as being important for my own preparation, this, I was told, was also a way to show respect to ayahuasca and commitment to the "*healing process*" before beginning ceremonies - a concept which at the time seemed strange. Great emphasis was placed on intention by the centre owner and retreat organiser in preparatory discussions with me and other retreat participants when the time

came, as it has been by all ceremonial and retreat organisers I've come into contact with since. When drinking a cup of ayahuasca when ceremonies began, we were instructed by him to *ask* ayahuasca for help with whatever we were struggling with. These were the first indications I had that ayahuasca was considered something that one could communicate with.

Following my first and second ceremonies, which passed reasonably uneventfully, I was speaking with the retreat organiser about my experiences thus far and he asked me if I had managed to open a dialogue with “*her*” during these sessions. I was initially confused by the question: “*With whom?*” I had thought. Partly from confusion and partly not wanting to disappoint, I lied that I had, which was greeted with great encouragement as a sign that I was connecting with “*her*”. The truth is, the possibility that I could engage in a dialogue with ayahuasca had not even occurred to me until that stage. Yet this conversation has stayed in my mind as the pivotal point at which the idea that ayahuasca had a spirit - *a female one apparently* – and that I could communicate with ‘her’, became possible. As I became more embedded in ayahuasca circles in the Iquitos region, these possibilities became more accepted realities.

Many ayahuasca retreat attendees are more familiar with ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ than I was upon entering retreat settings, with some having adopted the feminised characterisation of the ayahuasca spirit before even entering an ayahuasca ceremony. The acquired use of insider terminology, including the feminization of the ayahuasca spirit, being opposed with typical outsider understandings of plants or medicines, asserts a sense of belonging for newcomers within the community of ayahuasca drinkers there through shared knowledge, emblematic of their (largely) newfound animistic perspectives. Their perceptions of ayahuasca are clearly influenced by commercialised representations of ayahuasca propagated by the ayahuasca industry on

ayahuasca retreat websites and through preliminary information received from retreat organisers, as well as by socialisation within retreat settings and the wider community.

David Dupuis's model of the 'socialization of hallucinations' (2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022) is applicable here. Dupuis argues that through the dynamic of belief transmission supported by a state of *hypersuggestibility*, produced by psychedelics, Western retreat participants re-interpret their ayahuasca experiences according to frameworks transmitted by ceremonial facilitators through what he refers to as an 'experiential verification process' involving the 'recipient's efforts to test the object of the belief'.²⁷

An internet search on ayahuasca yields many reports and video testimonials of experiences of "meeting Mother Ayahuasca."²⁸ Interestingly, some of these reports do not contain descriptions of an actual encounter with the spirit of Mother Ayahuasca, evidencing that 'meeting' Mother Ayahuasca has now become accepted terminology within Western circles for experiencing ayahuasca. Others describe actual encounters with a feminine spirit with a loving presence. Examples from online testimonials include:

*"She sat across from me and had a feminine motherly feel to her."*²⁹

*"The Ayahuasca spirit came to me in that space. She held me lovingly with my head against her chest as my soul wept like it never had before."*³⁰

*"The face of a female deity, large and hovering, made of swirling geometric patterns and neon pinks, greens and blue, welcomed me home. [...]"*³¹

²⁷ Specifically, his research addresses how narratives of demonic possession and exorcism are appropriated by Western retreat participants at the ayahuasca addiction treatment centre Takiwasi in Tarapoto, Peru, through the influence of discussion sessions between ceremonies during retreats (Dupuis 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

²⁸ E.g. <https://medium.com/respira-love/meeting-mother-ayahuasca-duality-within-the-singularity-1b20bdd3d358>; [Episode 13 - Meeting Mother Ayahuasca - YouTube](#); [My experience with Mother Ayahuasca - YouTube](#); [Meeting Mother Ayahuasca \(Vlog #4\) - YouTube](#).

²⁹ https://www.reddit.com/r/DMT/comments/80ibb1/did_i_meet_mother_ayahuasca.

³⁰ https://www.reddit.com/r/DMT/comments/nk53lu/meeting_the_mother/.

³¹ <https://erowid.org/experiences/exp.php?ID=85981>.

*'Even though one's motivating reasons and the subsequent visions are deeply personal, there is one striking parallel in many people's experiences: the presence of a divine entity in the form of a motherly teaching figure -- Mother Ayahuasca.'*³²

Primed by things they've been told or things they have read, newcomers entering ayahuasca retreats often look forward to meeting Mother Ayahuasca, or indeed, are encouraged to by retreat and ceremonial facilitators, as in my own example. Visions are easily the most sought-after aspect of the ayahuasca experience for Western participants, and visions of 'Mother Ayahuasca', perhaps the most coveted visionary experience. 'She' is typically envisaged as a beautiful "human-like" but non-human creature that takes different forms including an anaconda, a female jaguar, a mother lioness, and a sensual blue woman. Examples of visionary images of Mother Ayahuasca are depicted in ayahuasca visionary art, which is sold extensively in Iquitos, and replicated across the internet. The example below is typical of such images, produced by a local Iquitonian artist whose work is prolific in the city.

³² <https://www.behold-retreats.com/post/mother-ayahuasca>.



Figure 13: 'Mother Ayahuasca', artwork by Wilder Pereyra Apagueño.

I thus propose that Western participants' encounters with Mother Ayahuasca, including visionary, audible and 'felt' experiences, are influenced by socialization within retreat settings involving guidance from retreat facilitators and group discussions with other retreat participants, and through contact with the wider ayahuasca community, including online accounts.

While they are a popular focus of conversation for ayahuasca retreat participants and reports are extensive across the internet, my research revealed that actual visions of Mother Ayahuasca are not as common as these sources imply. Indeed, some people who have worked with ayahuasca for many years admitted never having had a vision of Mother Ayahuasca. I joined a conversation one day between two facilitators from a large centre who were discussing just this. During approximately six years of

ceremonies neither of them believed they had ever seen ‘her’. This was both a source of humour for them and a source of shame, something they said they would not want to admit to participants in retreats at their centre. Seeing Mother Ayahuasca is often considered to be evidence of one’s connection with ayahuasca. Conversely, a lack of such encounters might suggest that a person is not very “*connected*”, which is a potential source of embarrassment for an experienced drinker and, as the attitude of these facilitators suggests, might threaten their authority as a guide. Yet these facilitators are by no means anomalies in the community.

Experienced *ayahuasqueros* and apprentices also argue that there are many mistaken cases of identity as well as inconclusive possible encounters. As one ‘gringo shaman’ explained, “*it’s common for people to think they’ve seen Mother Ayahuasca when they haven’t really, because they’re unfamiliar with the space and with her, and also that’s what people talk about most so people want to believe they’ve seen her.*” Throughout my research I probed interviewees about their encounters with ayahuasca asking if and how they see its spirit. An American apprentice *ayahuasquero* who has been helping to run an ayahuasca centre for six years first told me with certainty, “*I see her as her.*” Yet when I asked him *how* he sees her he hesitated and said:

“Well I’ve seen blue women, like right out of a Hindu painting sitting around me. I’ve seen the anaconda, the jaguar archetype. I don’t know which one is which really. Nobody’s wearing name tags you know... But one time I think I might have really seen her. She looked pretty terrifying and I looked her right in the eyes... I told Roland (my Maestro) about it and he said that was the ayahuasca... but that’s just his interpretation... I dunno’ if he was seeing what I was seeing...”

His answer reflects the often-confusing reality of the ayahuasca vision-scape.

Furthermore, his most likely encounter with Mother Ayahuasca in which she appeared “*terrifying*” is clearly in conflict with the commodified, benevolent version.

Retreat participants are also guided by retreat facilitators to communicate with Mother Ayahuasca, especially by silently stating their intentions when drinking their cup of ayahuasca at the start of the ceremony. ‘She’ is believed to respond to people’s intentions and needs by providing guidance through the visionary experience of an ayahuasca ceremony and through audible messages. Messages received from Mother Ayahuasca usually take the form of personal guidance that encourage self-care and actions that enable a more fulfilling life, in line with the popularised positive image of Ayahuasca as a loving mother spirit.

Some messages recalled by participants in my research are quite general, such as *“she told me I need to love myself”* and *“be love and let love flow through you to all things”*. Others are more specific: for example, a 22 year old Canadian retreat participant recalled from one of his initial ceremonies that, *“Mother Aya said this to me, she said it in these words: “don’t make a fork in the road for another person... she told me I shouldn’t be wasting my time doing things for other people, I shouldn’t be doing things that don’t fulfil, I really do need to find the thing that makes me get up in the morning”*.

Some retreat participants are very sceptical about the existence of spirits when they first enter ayahuasca realms. A 20-year - old man from England was very open about his scepticism when he began his ayahuasca retreat at El Espiritista’s centre. He was mainly there through curiosity, he said, and assumed ayahuasca was *“just a drug and not a spiritual practice”*. Respectful and interested in others’ beliefs, he enjoyed discussing the relative worth of scientific and spiritual perspectives with his fellow retreat participants who were vocal about their own beliefs in spirits and shared experiences of spiritual encounters in post ceremony group discussions. By the end of the retreat, he was also reporting visions of spiritual entities.

Some participants are reflexive in hindsight about how socialisation within ayahuasca retreat settings influenced their interpretations of ceremonial experiences and perceptions of ayahuasca. For example, a 30 - year - old English female participant in her first ayahuasca retreat commented in a follow up interview six months later: *“At the time I felt I had interacted with Mother Ayahuasca because everyone was talking about her and other spirits, but in retrospect I don’t know if what I was seeing were actually just hallucinations or my imagination.”*

An American man who I first met in 2014 when he arrived in Iquitos severely depressed, recalled in an interview six years later: *“I didn’t come here as a tourist. I didn’t come here for a light show. I came here to see if there was a God. If there wasn’t, I brought a rope in my bag and I was ‘gonna hang myself in the jungle.”* His initial encounters with ayahuasca were encounters with a “female presence” that started rubbing his chest and telling him everything was going to be OK. He preferred not to call her ‘Mother Ayahuasca’, due to his awareness of and resistance to the commercialised image. Yet he explained that: *“basically what it comes down to, whatever it was, was exactly what I needed. I needed a mother, someone nurturing to tell me ‘it’s gonna be OK...That’s what I needed and that’s what came.”* His comments are reminiscent of what has become a kind of mantra in Western ayahuasca circles that *“ayahuasca gives you what you need, not what you want”*. His comments also reflect the widespread belief among Westerners in the ayahuasca community that the ayahuasca spirit has positive agency and is responsive to participants’ expectations and needs.

Omniscient Ayahuasca

I have argued that ayahuasca retreat websites and other sources of information regarding ayahuasca portray and reinforce the feminized characterisation of ayahuasca as a healing mother entity, associated closely with the Mother Earth, and that

‘encounters’ with Mother Ayahuasca are shaped and influenced by a process of socialisation within the ayahuasca community and retreat settings. Beyond being presented by the commercial industry and actors within it as a wholly benevolent healing entity, ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ is furthermore portrayed as a powerful *omniscient* being in which Western retreat participants are encouraged to place total trust.

An example of this rhetoric from the retreat website belonging to the centre where my research began is as follows:

*“She knows when issues and blockages are ready to be released and in what order. The **Chacruna** opens the participant’s third eye, making the visionary spirit world accessible when deemed appropriate by the Medicine. She is capable of producing beautiful celestial visions as well as dark, scary underworld experiences, or absolutely nothing visually... it all depends on what is needed for you at the time. It is very important to trust in the entire process, for the **Medicine** is ultimately here to heal and liberate us from our baggage, not to hurt or damage us. You will always receive what you need.”³³*

As the extract reflects, healing is conceived of in this context as involving difficult visionary experiences related to our inner worlds, through which Mother Ayahuasca is presented as a loving guide. It is interesting to note that in contrast, local practitioners in ayahuasca shamanism tend only to celebrate and encourage the fostering of ‘positive’, clear and colourful visions, and suggest that darker visions are either simply manifestations of dark energies being purged, or, especially if apprenticing, a sign that greater mastery of the spirit world and is required, as in the guidance typically offered to apprentices by their *maestros*: “you have to master/dominate the spirits” (“*tienes que dominar los espíritos*”). Yet, through the kind of discourse portrayed in the retreat website example, which is also exhibited in discussions with participants in retreat contexts, retreat participants are encouraged to trust

³³ E.g.: <https://rainforesthealingcenter.com/what-is-ayahuasca/>.

completely in ayahuasca's positive agency and negate their own desires for an enjoyable experience.

Trust in ayahuasca and "the healing process" is paramount according to most touristic ayahuasca retreat organisers and facilitators' advice to participants. This message is echoed throughout preparatory and ceremonial guidance received during retreats. Participants' narratives regarding ayahuasca ceremonies often reflect this guidance, as this excerpt from a follow up interview with a retreat participant exemplifies:

"Whatever my intentions were going into the ceremony, Mother Ayahuasca already knew. What needed working on within me was already being worked on, and the spirits of the plants were conscious of this so I've stopped trying to control the experience and allow the medicine to work on me and show me what I need to see."

The usual way in which touristic ceremonies are conducted with participants lying down on mattresses, as opposed to sitting up in chairs in more alert positions as they usually do in local ceremonies, is a physical representation, I would argue, of the approach Western participants are expected to take, further encouraging an attitude of trust and surrender to ayahuasca and "the healing process."

Transient participants in ayahuasca shamanism usually maintain their trust in ayahuasca's omniscience and positive agency, influenced by socialisation within retreat settings and unaware of wider shamanic culture in the region. Yet those that become embedded in ayahuasca culture in Iquitos also become aware of ayahuasca's potentialities to inflict harm through *bruejria*. Mesturini Cappo has argued that as one becomes immersed in ayahuasca networks, one becomes aware of ayahuasca's 'negative agency' as well as its 'positive agency' (Mesturini Cappo 2018). My research suggests rather that ayahuasca's agency can be viewed as being neutral, with the multiple possibilities of manifesting in conceivably 'positive' or 'negative' ways through relation with ceremonial participants with their own individual life histories and expectations, and moreover, with shamanic practitioners engaged

in *curanderismo* and/or *brujería* practices. As I shall elucidate in the following chapter, contrary to the commercial ayahuasca industry's emphasis on ayahuasca's agency, presented as exclusively positive, mestizo shamans and Western insiders in Iquitos place far greater emphases on the power and significance of shamanic agency.

Conclusion

The coming to prominence of 'Mother Ayahuasca' in Westernized ayahuasca practice is largely a response to patriarchal social systems from which Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism typically desire to break. Ironically, mestizo shamanism is itself a product of highly gendered, male-dominated tradition, although developments due to the impacts of Western participation and Feminism have made way for more female practitioners, as addressed previously. In summary, in this chapter I have analysed how the image of Mother Ayahuasca is one that is in many ways imposed upon ayahuasca participants as a norm and thus experienced as such. In turn, this image contributes to an overall feminization of ayahuasca, one that steers the experience toward a more familiar and reassuring encounter that contrasts to local understandings.

The greater emphasis within the commercial ayahuasca industry on ayahuasca's agency, presented as being exclusively positive, is contrasted with local and experienced insiders' greater emphases on shamanic agency. Don Luco always told me that "*You can do anything with ayahuasca. It all depends on the man.*" Just as ayahuasca may appear in different genders, it may be used for harm as well as healing. According to mestizo healers and apprentices in my research, shamanic agency – the intentions and actions of *ayahuasqueros* leading ceremonies - are more significant than ayahuasca's agency. According to this view, ayahuasca itself is not to blame for harm caused through its use, but the "*man*" or indeed

woman in charge of its use, the *ayahuasquero/a* directing the spirit of ayahuasca and other entities in spiritual realms.

This consideration is central to my analysis within subsequent chapters. In the following chapter I explore how ayahuasca's potentialities for healing and harm are mediated through the establishment of relations between *ayahuasqueros* and spiritual entities within the predominantly Christian pantheon that comprises mestizo ayahuasca shamanism's cosmological framework.

Chapter Six: Christian Cosmology and Hybrid Forms

Through the weavings of ayahuasca's movements through cross-cultural boundaries over time and space, we can observe the amalgamation of different spiritual and religious traditions converging under the umbrella of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism. As described in Chapter Three, the formation of relationships between *ayahuasqueros* and ayahuasca and other plant spirits form the basis of ayahuasca shamanism. Yet, within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism relationships between *ayahuasqueros* and spiritual allies are further mediated through ideas derived from Christian ideology. It is through the workings of the *ayahuasquero*'s allegiances within this spiritual framework that ayahuasca's potential for healing or harm, its 'positive' and/or 'negative' agency, is realised. Furthermore, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism incorporates further influences from Eastern religions and philosophy and ancient esoteric doctrines, thus exhibiting a syncretic cosmology.

So, what does this hybrid cosmology look like? How has it been interpreted and developed through Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism? Where does 'Mother Ayahuasca' feature within it? And how are relationships between different actors, and between different elements of the practice, including the apparent duality between *curanderismo* and *brujería* at the heart of ayahuasca shamanism, negotiated through this cosmology and ayahuasca?

In what follows I will address these questions through my presentation of shamans' cosmologies, Western seekers' cosmologies and hybrid forms that flourish within this touristic context. My discussion concludes by focusing on the relation between 'Mother Ayahuasca' and the Mother/Virgin Mary or Madonna, treated with great reverence by mestizo shamans. Drawing on anthropological theory and my own experience, my analysis emphasises the co-existence of multiple cosmological perspectives in this context and the role

of shamanic agency in negotiating between these perspectives when relating to local people, transient Western participants and Western apprentices.

“Eres católico?” (‘You’re Catholic?’)

I remember my surprise when I first discovered Don Luco was “*católico*”. Away from the retreat centre where I first met him, and where many of my preconceptions about Amazonian shamans had remained intact, I was dieting with Don Luco as part of a small group in the forest nearby his hometown of Jenaro Herrera during the following weeks. For holding ayahuasca ceremonies, Don Luco had brought a card with him with a Madonna’s image on it, which he set out alongside his *agua florida* (scented holy water) and *mapacho* (pure tobacco cigarettes made from *nicotiana rustica*) as a basic *mesa* (ritual “table” or space) for the jungle.

‘*You’re Catholic?*’ (“*Eres católico?*”), I asked, somewhat disapprovingly. Like many Westerners engaging in ayahuasca shamanism, I held a strong aversion to Christianity at this time, specifically in fact, Catholicism. I associated ayahuasca with ‘spirituality’ and opposed this with organized religion, which I viewed as oppressive and devoid of spiritual value. “*Yes, of course, I’m Catholic*” (“*Si claro, soy católico*”), Luco replied, indignantly. In fact, as I would discover in time, most mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in the Iquitos region identify as *católico* or *cristiano*, as do many Shipibo *ayahuasqueros* also. It is often initial misconceptions that lead us to the real fruits of anthropological analysis. Along this line of thought, Viveiros de Castro has proposed that ‘Anthropology then, is about misunderstandings’ (2004:11). Advocating for perspectival anthropology and the method of ‘controlled equivocation’, Viveiros de Castro has called for special attention to be paid by anthropologists to ‘equivocal “homonyms”’ between the language of researcher and that of ‘others’ (De Castro 2004: 7). Asad similarly proposes that ‘the comparison of embedded concepts (representations)

between societies differently located in time or space' is what distinguishes modern anthropology. He argues in relation to the concepts of secularism and religion that 'the important thing in this comparative analysis is not their origin (Western or non-Western), but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable' (Asad 2003: 17).

Specifically for touristic ayahuasca contexts, Anne-Marie Losonczy and Silvia Mesturini Cappelletti, drawing on Marshall Sahlins' theories concerning "working misunderstanding" between different cultural systems (Sahlins 1982), have identified what they refer to as 'ritualized misunderstanding' between participants and local practitioners within ceremonial contexts (Losonczy & Mesturini Cappelletti 2014). These considerations apply to my reading of *medicina*/ medicine and "*Madre*"/Mother, as this chapter will address.

The concepts of "*católico*" and "*cristiano*" require initial attention. So, what does it mean to be Christian to my mestizo informants compared with my own and my Western informants' perceptions of Christianity?

In Viveiros De Castro's terms, this analysis requires the work of translation, for 'to translate is to presume that an equivocation always exists; 'it is to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming an univocity—the essential similarity—between what the Other and We are saying' (De Castro 2004: 10). '*Traduttore traditore*' ('translator traitor', as the Italian catchphrase goes). Amazonian shamans' understandings of and experiences of being *cristiano* or *católico*, compared with Western spiritual seekers' experiences and perceptions, may be quite different things. Furthermore, different cultural groups contain a wealth of individual interpretations of Christian belief and practice making 'perspectival anthropology' and the method of 'controlled equivocation' a necessity for elucidating the complexity of cultural differences and convergences at play.

Christian Shamans

Through the eyes of the inexperienced Western participant in ayahuasca shamanism *ayahuasqueros* seem to have more in common with witches who were burnt at the stake by Christians during the Inquisition than with typical Christian church-goers, due to their engagement in spiritually-orientated practices. I choose this analogy because it is one that I've heard Westerners in Iquitos use marking the Inquisition as the key turning point in history whereby spiritual practices were apparently replaced by Church and State authority. However, there is nothing to say that witches were not also Christians or at least believers. This analogy is another example of the perceived opposition between spirituality and Christianity typically conceived of by Westerners, but not necessarily accurate.

Christian shamans do not fit within Western stereotypes and have perhaps been largely ignored by Western observers for this reason. Indeed, it has been argued that 'indigenous Christianity' has also not been taken seriously by Western researchers and observers historically, due to the persistence of romanticised views of indigenous Amazonians as animists living in harmony with nature who are 'spiritual rather than religious' (Opas 2017:120). In the context of Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism romanticised perceptions apply to both mestizo and indigenous peoples and cultures who are grouped together by outside observers and transient participants in the practice, as well as within the local category of *ayahuasqueros*.

The tendency to ignore native forms of Christianity is not unique to Amazonia as an ethnographic region but can be seen across the anthropological literature historically (Barker 1992). Following a lack of anthropological interest in Christianity for many years, due surely to its association with Euro-American cultures being the 'home' cultures of most anthropologists and therefore apparently contrary to anthropology's interest in the 'exotic' (Robbins 2003, Cannell 2006; Gow 2009; Vilaca 2011), as well as the general animosity that has existed between anthropologists and missionaries historically (Rapoport, and Van der

Geest 1991; Vilaca 2011), the study of ‘Native Christians’ in Amazonia has risen in recent years (Vilaca & Wright 2009; Opas 2017) with the wider growth of the ‘anthropology of Christianity’ (e.g. Barker, 1992; James, Douglas & Lienhardt 1988; Robbins 2004; Cannell 2006; Engelke & Tomlinson 2006; Keane 2007; Garrard 2020).

Christianity is a core part of Peruvian culture. Over 80% of Peruvians identify as *catolicos*, a percentage which is even higher in the Maynas province of Peru where Iquitos is located. Catholicism is furthermore taught in schools according to Government guidelines (Beyer 2009: 330). Yet other Christian denominations, such as Evangelical and Sabbatarian Churches, have become more prominent in recent years through the work of missionaries (Luzar & Fragoso 2013). This is evident in the Iquitos region where Catholicism is very much still dominant while also Jehovah’s Witnesses and Evangelical denominations are becoming more active.

Moving away from viewing native forms of Christianity according to colonial histories of conversion, recent anthropological studies of ‘native Christians’ in Amazonia emphasize the agency of local people; focusing on ‘the native’s point of view’, they address how Amazonian communities interpret and incorporate Christianity within their current beliefs and practices, asking what it means to be *cristiano* within these communities (Vilaca & Wright 2009; Luzar & Fragoso 2013; Opas 2017). Being *cristiano* for Gow’s *mestizo* informants in the Bajo Huallaga region of the north Peruvian Amazon refers to being a ‘civilised human’ as opposed to ‘wild Indians’ or ‘animals’ referring to other indigenous people. This modern usage almost certainly arose in the Jesuit missions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (*ibid.*:33). For Gow’s Piro informants during the 1980s, conversion to evangelicalism during the 1940s was forgotten; rather, they presented themselves as having always been Christian and remembered the period of conversion as the origin of their ‘civilised’ lives.

A key point of interest for my research within anthropological debates about ‘native Christianity’ is the question of whether animistic cosmologies are replaced by Christian cosmology or other hybrid forms created following conversion. In *Beyond Nature and Culture* Descola argues that, while one ontology is always dominant, it is possible for different ontologies to exist alongside each other (Descola 2013). Indeed, recent scholarship on the subject emphasises the overlapping of animistic and Christian beliefs and practices within indigenous Christian communities (Luzar & Fragoso 2013; Opas 2017). Opas has argued that ‘despite (Western) Christianity often being contrasted with indigenous spirituality as an advocate of colonialism, present day indigenous theology embraces both’ (Opas 2017:127). While most Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism contrast Christianity with other forms of spirituality; within mestizo cosmology no distinction is drawn between Christianity and other forms of spirituality; they are jointly accommodated as mestizo shamans deem appropriate. As indicated, mestizo shamans are predominantly *catolicos*. Amazonian history records many atrocities conducted against indigenous people by ‘Catholic’ colonisers. Yet during the last century Catholicism has been more sympathetic to native cosmologies than Evangelicalism in Amazonian contexts (Luzar & Fragoso 2013; Opas 2017). This follows the official Catholic approach to ‘inculturation’, as defined by the Second Vatican Council held in 1962–1965, as one of mutual influence and continuity in which, ‘beliefs, values, customs, symbols and institutions of a particular culture give rise to a new version of the Gospel,’ which then affects, in turn, all these by ‘healing them’ (Espeja 1993: 12, cited and translated by Opas 2017: 124). Thus, native cosmologies and practice have been seen as less of a threat to the Catholic missionary process in Amazonia than they have by their Evangelical counterpart (Luzar & Fragoso 2013; Opas 2017), and vice versa. Participation in shamanism and Catholicism are complementary aspects of people’s lives (e.g. Capiberibe 2018; Hugh-Jones 1994; Wright 1999). In contemporary Amazonian

contexts it is usual for Catholics, and also many Anglicans, to visit shamans with no apparent contradiction between being Christian and engaging in shamanic healing practices; this is different from Evangelical and Sabbatarian Church teachings that oppose traditional animistic cosmologies (Luzar & Fragoso 2013).

Mestizo ayahuasca shamanism is not only considered compatible with Catholicism but is representative of the mixing of Catholicism and shamanism. ‘Ayahuasca Churches’, the Santo Daime and the União do Vegetal (UDV), originating in Brazil and spreading internationally in recent years, are obvious examples of this syncretism (Labate & Jungaberle 2011; Dawson 2013). So too is mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the Peruvian Amazon. Indeed, traditional mestizo ‘folk healing’ practices have been defined by anthropologists as a form of ‘folk Catholicism’ (Chaumeil 1992; Dobkin de Rios 1992; Beyer 2009).

Differentiating mestizo shamanism from ‘traditional’ native practice whereby the healer gains validity through community approval, anthropologist of mestizo Amazonian shamanism in Lowland South America, Chaumeil has suggested that the shaman ‘must now seek his approval from the gods’ so ‘with the introduction of the Christian pantheon and popular Catholicism, we have perhaps entered an era of “moralizing shamanism”’ (Chaumeil 1992:5). In the mestizo context Peter Gow has suggested that the ayahuasca ritual ‘implicitly parodies the Catholic Mass’ (Gow 1994: 107). This ritualistic framework may have been subsequently incorporated into traditional practice following conversion, as suggested by Suárez Álvarez (2023).

Stephen Beyer outlines Catholic elements of practice involved in mestizo ayahuasca ritual including the use of saint cards with images of Jesus, St Anthony and the Virgin Mary, and most prominently, the ceremonial singing of *oraciones* (prayers) to Christian saints and figures, predominantly Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, considered powerful healing spirits.

Beyer emphasizes the devotion felt by mestizo shamans towards these figures and compares the relationships established with them to relationships established with medicinal plant spirits like that of ayahuasca. He also emphasizes the role of their counterpart the Devil and the existence of ‘pacts’ with the Devil in mestizo sorcery (Beyer 2009).

Building on these depictions of mestizo ‘folk Catholicism’ and ‘folk healing’ practices, in this chapter I will describe mestizo cosmology in its contemporary context within the realm of the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos. I will examine human/non-human relations within this cosmology addressing the interplay between shamanic relations with ayahuasca and relations with other spirits. I will also address recent cosmological developments influenced by cross-cultural interactions and globalisation, including the coming to prominence of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’. My discussion draws on Asad (2003) who invites us to consider secularism and religion both as systems of cosmological explanation used to define people’s relationships to each other and the universe. I propose that Westerners’ constructions of ‘spirituality’ can be seen as secular and religious as to better understand how mestizo shamans define and engage with cosmology in a dynamic way, dependant on social context. I will begin by elucidating what it means to be *cristiano* for mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in the Iquitos region.

Being *Cristiano*

The town of Jenaro Herrera, as well as being a hotbed of shamanic activity, has a lively Christian community. Despite the existence of several denominations, the community as a whole is in some sense united by being *cristiano*. This also generally extends to national identity. For Peruvian people, Christianity is part of their national and personal identity as Peruvian citizens (Chavarria 1970, Stanger 1927). To identify as Christian then, is related to typically identifying as Peruvian, or alternatively, to not identify as Christian would be considered locally as comparable to not identifying as Peruvian. For mestizo Amazonians this

distinction is also a way for them to distinguish themselves from indigenous people regardless of how indigenous peoples identify their spiritual beliefs. The term '*cristiano*' is not merely a marker of being a 'civilised human' (Gow 2009) for the mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in my research, but also a declaration of faith. As well as distinguishing themselves from indigenous people and practices, they placed even greater emphasis on distinguishing between their practice and institutionalised forms of Christianity, particularly Evangelicalism. Don Luco referred to himself as "*católico*" whilst distancing himself from the churches ("*las Iglesias*") and often openly criticising the churches and their leaders, emphasising the moral strictness and corruption of the Church and the hypocrisy of church leaders for preaching one thing and doing another, for instance drinking alcohol and engaging in infidelity. This mocking of the priesthood is common within mestizo communities, as also noted by Beyer (2010: 331). Don Luco would sometimes refer jokingly to Evangelical Church congregations as "*the crazy people*" ("*los locos*") when their singing during services could be heard late at night. The pastor and his church sometimes referred to Don Luco as "the devil" ("*el diablo*") believing shamanic practices and working with spirits to be the Devil's work. The demonisation of shamanic practice has been widespread in the conversion rhetoric of the missions in Amazonia (Fausto 2004). Indeed, a quiet rivalry could be observed between Don Luco and his family and the neighbouring Evangelical Church, its Pastor and his family in Jenaro Herrera. Whilst the families lived for the most part harmoniously side by side, they criticised each other in private and challenged each other's practice in conversation with visiting Western retreat participants and volunteers.

Similarly to Don Luco, El Maestro criticised the Church and referred to himself as "*Christian but not fundamental*", distancing himself from institutionalised Christianity and more

specifically perhaps, Evangelicals. He explained, “*I am Christian because I believe in God*”. It became clear during my fieldwork in Jenaro Herrera that within this mestizo context belief in God is usually defined as being Christian, but this is not necessarily a marker of allegiance to any organised church or denomination. Amongst the mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in Jenaro Herrera God was described in typically Christian terms as “*the only one*”, being “*in heaven*”, personified as “*the father*”, a monotheistic, all-seeing *male* presence residing above humanity whose will is understood as guiding the events of life, and indeed death. For instance, death of loved ones, especially when unexpected, was always spoken about this way as being the will of God, beyond human understanding. Furthermore, El Maestro emphasised, “*God created everything, the good and also the bad*”. This inclusion of “*the bad*” is a crucial point I wish to highlight and will return to.

The divide between Church based Christian practice and mestizo shamanic practice is not as marked as some of my research participants’ positions suggest. Although the afore-mentioned *ayahuasqueros* did not engage with Church based Christianity and were vocally disparaging about church- based practice, especially Evangelical, some of their family members did whilst also engaging in ayahuasca ceremonies, showing that for some, these different forms of practice are considered compatible.

More strikingly, La Doctora, a mestizo *ayahuasquera* in Iquitos, described herself as “*one hundred percent Catholic*” and attended Church every Sunday as well as conducting shamanic healing. A self- proclaimed ‘spiritualist prayer healer’ (*oracionista espiritista*), her Catholicism is clearly an integral aspect of her spiritual healing practice, which for her is connected with the Church. Indeed, she recalls her initiation into shamanic apprenticeship as a *dieta* of ninety days of walking around the city, involving fasting and learning prayers (*oraciones*), which began and ended at the Church. Clearly for La Doctora, her spiritual healing practice is connected with the Catholic Church, although, she says, it is dismissed and

gossiped about by some of the congregation. Don Pedro, another urban *ayahuasquero* in Iquitos who holds ceremonies in his house primarily for locals, one of the oldest *ayahuasqueros* in my research, was emphatic that any apprentice of his must be baptised. Yet, he is not an active churchgoer, he only attends Church occasionally for events such as baptisms and weddings (the latter usually conducted when a couple is older because, as was explained to me, they pass into heaven together and without sin).

El Espiritista, with whom I did fieldwork within his touristic centre on the edge of the city, first defined himself to me as *Cristiano* but emphasised his lack of allegiance to any sect of Christianity. In family contexts El Espiritista identifies as *Católico*.. Other members of El Espiritista's family are practicing Jehovah's Witnesses who are resoundingly disapproving of shamanic practice. Yet his daughter occasionally drinks ayahuasca and explained that this is not something she divulges to her Jehovah's Witness congregation who would be disapproving. As the above examples are testament to, negotiating the communication and practice of Christian identity alongside shamanic practice is usual for practicing mestizo shamans and their families embedded in a Christian society in which shamanic practice is quite widely disapproved of or even demonised. This is the case within Catholic as well as Evangelical contexts although for some, including mestizo shamans themselves, Catholicism and shamanism are considered compatible.

On another occasion, when I asked El Espiritista specifically about his use of Christian prayer in ceremony, he explained his position further: "*You were either Catholic or Jehovah's Witness*" where he grew up, he said, and "*at school, you learnt Christian songs and prayers*". However, he explained, "*this is only in the mind*". Gesturing to the chest he went on:

“God is here... in our heart... our peace and connection... it is not important if we think different things, if someone is Christian and someone is Buddhist, God is in everything, God is everywhere in the Universe.”

El Espiritista suggests that Christianity is simply the framework within which he was brought up and within which he practices as an *espiritista* and *ayahuasquero*. His perspective of God as all - encompassing regardless of religious allegiances, as expressed here is very open compared to more typical local perspectives and reflects his familiarity with wider perspectives of religion and spirituality, acquired at least in part through relation with Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism.

The example of El Espiritista illustrates how some mestizo shamans consciously position and express their religious/ spiritual identity in relation to their social context, thus identifying as Catholic when in the presence of Catholic family members, which may well be to “appease” them as his apprentice suggested, but may also feel the most appropriate expression of his beliefs in this context, just as distancing himself from any branch of Christianity felt more appropriate when communicating with me.

While varied perspectives exist among mestizo *ayahuasqueros* regarding their Christian identity and practice, for all mestizo *ayahuasqueros*, ayahuasca ceremonies provide a channel through which to engage in communication with God, Christian spirits and allies.

Ceremony and Cosmos

Ayahuasca and other plant spirits are positioned at the centre of a Christian hierarchy of spirits. Like humans, they occupy earthly realms, below heavenly realms where the Christian father God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and other Christian spirits are positioned, and above hell realms, where the devil and other demonic spirits reside. Particular reverence is

shown towards Jesus Christ who is considered the archetypal healer. Indeed, Don Luco's main argument when I first questioned him about how his Christian beliefs existed alongside his shamanic practice was, "*Jesus Christ was a healer*". Great reverence is also shown towards the Virgin Mary, or *Madona* figure who also features prominently in mestizo ceremonies.

For the *ayahuasquero* and ceremonial participants, relations with spirits in different realms are mediated through ayahuasca. Heavenly spirits are often referred to as "*spirits of the light*" and include angels and elders as well as prominent Christian saints and figures; these are considered to be entirely good and the most powerful healing spirits. This realm is otherwise known as the realm of 'white magic' ("*magia blanca*") or 'pure medicine' ("*pura medicina*").

Plant spirits including ayahuasca, like human spirits, occupy the state of duality or state of neutrality, containing both dark and light with the potential for good and evil, to heal or to harm. The earthly realms are the realms of 'green magic' ("*magia verde*"), which are connected with nature and associated with healing, and 'red magic' ("*magia roja*"), which is connected with sexuality and blood and used to do harm, although some of my research participants claimed this can also be used with good intentions. Hell realms are the realms of 'black magic' ("*magia negra*") associated with pure evil. Through practice, such as *dieta*, the *ayahuasquero* forms allegiances with spirits in different realms and learns to work with them to enact or fortify healing or harm. The mestizo ayahuasca ritual contains Christianised elements including the use of a *mesa* ('table'), a kind of altar, which may feature a Bible, Christian art or icon cards, holy water (*agua florida*) and perhaps other perfumes and often a crucifixion model or form of cross, as in the example pictured below of Don Luis and Don Orlando's ceremonial *mesa*.



Figure 14: Ceremonial mesa in urban Iquitos setting.

These elements are clearly present in local urban ceremonies in Iquitos with *curanderos* who hold ceremony in their house for local people each week. Many of these urban *ayahuasqueros* do not work within the ayahuasca tourism industry so their ceremonies reflect local urbanised practice, largely uninfluenced by recent Western touristic participation. Their ayahuasca rituals hold much greater resemblance to a Catholic sermon than that of *ayahuasqueros* working in touristic contexts. Their *mesas* are more altar-like in the way just described, and their ceremonial participants sit on chairs or benches that resemble Church pews rather than lying down as they do in almost all Westernized centres and settings.

Mestizo ayahuasca ceremonies represent the co-existence of animist and Christian elements of practice. The use of prayers (*oraciones*) alongside healing songs addressed to plant spirits (*icaros*) in ceremonies is perhaps the clearest reflection of this mixing. *Icaros* feature prominently within Peruvian *vegetalismo* and are learned directly from plant spirits through the practice of *dieta* or passed down to apprentices from their *maestros*. Prayers (*oraciones*), both spoken and sung, are also prominent throughout mestizo ayahuasca rituals. These are addressed to Christian figures, predominantly Jesus Christ, the Christian God, the Virgin Mary, and angels. Some *ayahuasqueros* begin with *oraciones* followed by *icaros*, as Don

Luco usually did, whereas others “*work upwards*” beginning with *icaros* and moving on to *oraciones*, as El Espiritista practiced. Local urban *ayahuasqueros*’ ceremonies are filled with prayers (*oraciones*) and few if any *icaros* addressed to plant spirits, as with La Doctora, primarily an *oracionista*.

One interpretation that the patterns in my research suggest, is that more ruralised *ayahuasqueros* focus more on plant spirits than urbanised healers, a possible reflection therefore of their geographical locations - being closer to the jungle or conversely closer to Church strongholds. Due to Westerners’ romanticised attraction to rural Amazonian life, *ayahuasqueros* who work in the tourism industry may also have been sought in these more ruralised areas historically. Yet, it is also clear and was sometimes made overt by practitioners, as we saw in the example of El Espiritista and his apprentice in the previous chapter, that *ayahuasqueros* working with Western participants in touristic contexts are responsive to their expectations and needs and may adapt their practices accordingly. Yet, initiation into mestizo shamanism requires familiarity with Christian cosmology and an understanding of your position within it and therefore, your relationship to God and the Devil.

Connecting with God

Influenced by commercial and Western rhetoric, ayahuasca’s reputation as “*the medicine*” was heavily etched in my mind and prominent in conversation with people in the field for much of my research. It was a pivotal moment therefore, when Don Luco turned to me one day, many months into my time at his centre, and said, “*Do you know, when I speak about the medicine, really I am speaking about God?*”.

This was a revelation that lifted the veil of my preconceptions. As I began to engage in local ceremonies in the city also, I saw that all the mestizo shamans in my research emphasized

that to do good work with ayahuasca and enact healing, it is vital to “connect with God” during ceremonies. Within the local context in which shamanic practice is deeply associated with *brujería* and fear of *brujería* is widespread, emphasis on doing good work and enacting healing amongst mestizo shamans also functions as deflection against accusations of sorcery.

This connection between God, ayahuasca and the *ayahuasquero* is established at the beginning of ceremony when the ayahuasca is blessed with prayer and *mapacho* (tobacco) smoke, both offering protection for the participants, an act which combines animist and Christian beliefs and practice. The spirit of *mapacho*, considered a protective spirit, is also employed for cleansing, both of the ceremonial space and of participants in cleansing rituals called *sopladas* (from “*sopla*” meaning ‘to blow’) or *limpiezas* (from “*limpia*” meaning ‘clean’) and is believed to enhance intention. Prayers used for blessing the ayahuasca vary between *ayahuasqueros* as do all elements of ceremonial practice: sometimes the blessing (*bendicion*) is done silently by the *ayahuasquero* or spoken in hushed tones or otherwise sung. The blessing invokes blessings from the Christian God (referred to as “*father*” (*padre*)) for the ensuing ceremony. It is also usual for *ayahuasqueros* to bless each cup of ayahuasca individually through prayer or song and always with the use of *mapacho* smoke before they are given to ceremonial participants. Recent scholarship on the origins of ayahuasca shamanism (Suárez-Álvarez (2023) suggest that Christian blessings may have been incorporated later into traditional practice using *mapacho*. In this light the incorporation of the Christian pantheon and elements of practice can be seen to function as a means of resistance through which shamanic practice is made more acceptable within the dominant culture.

Urban *ayahuasqueros* Don Luis and Don Orlando begin each ceremony by blessing their ayahuasca with prayers to the Father God (“*padre*”), Jesus Christ and the holy spirit, asking that they accompany them during the ceremony along with the spirits of their late *maestro*.

Their prayers emphasize the same message communicated to me by Don Luco regarding the true nature of “*la medicina*”:

*"My father,
I ask to clean within the medicine,
I put medicinal strength,
Give me a beautiful spirit to continue mastering science,
Give me power in your hands, my father recommended, (to clean)
Because you are the owner of the universe Lord
You are the medicine father
You are the medicine father
You are the medicine father.
Without you father, nobody is a father, without you father, nobody is a father.
Send your great ministries of beings of light, sir, to give strength to protect, medicinal strength,
spiritual strength, strength of healing and cleansing, in your hands my father recommended."*

Their prayer conveys the belief not only that the Christian Father God is “*the medicine*”, but that he is the source of all spiritual healing power and strength. “Science” in this context refers to spiritual knowledge or shamanism, a point I return to subsequently. These opening blessing rituals reflect the belief within mestizo cosmology that ayahuasca is not essentially a healing spirit in and of itself but is a vehicle through which God’s healing power can be channelled. As I became more immersed in the urbanised environment of Iquitos and participated in ceremonies in local urban contexts, I recognised how opening blessings became more vocal and more expressive in addressing the Father God, suggesting that such practice was enacted more quietly in touristic settings due, it would seem, to the widespread aversion to Christianity amongst participants and *ayahuasqueros*’ sensibilities to this.

As one becomes accepted as an apprentice within mestizo shamanism, the importance of devotion to God becomes more significant and is vocalised by *maestros*. Indeed, it is an important aspect of initiation, which enables an understanding of how to negotiate cosmology involving spiritual allegiances. It was a surprise to me when Don Luco’s local apprentice first instructed me upon my leaving the centre where I first drank ayahuasca working as a volunteer at a retreat centre in 2014, “*You must focus on God.*” I had been slow on the uptake

and immersed in the touristic setting until this point, so this advice was perhaps the first inkling I had that ‘God’ was considered part of the cosmology within which ayahuasca existed. While my experiences with ayahuasca had greatly impacted my spiritual perspective, I had not yet accepted ‘God’ within this new cosmovision, due to my earlier rejection of Christianity. Similar advice arose throughout my research. For instance, Don Luco’s son Jolker explained:

“If you are not connecting with God, you will not see things, beautiful things... why do you see the things that are beautiful? Because you are connected with God, and always in the ceremony you have to connect to God because God is the only one, who is looking on us from above, and if you are connected with another, like we say bad spirits, you don’t see anything, only you stay closed like a door.”

This advice followed some difficult ceremonial experiences in which I had felt lost in a grey visionary landscape, in negative and fearful thought patterns, and unable to connect with my heart. Similarly, urban *ayahuasquero*, Don Pedro, instructed me following a *ventiada* in ceremony (ritual cleansing using the *chakapa*), which had the impact of clearing ‘dark’ energies around my head, which had descended like a cloud:

“You must concentrate on God. Everything else is of the Devil”.

Pacts with the Devil

Pactos (pacts) or *contractos* (contracts) are the names given to agreements made between *ayahuasqueros* and demonic spirits within ayahuasca shamanism. Some mestizo *ayahuasqueros*, such as El Maestro, refer to these practices as *la ciencia* (the science), distinguishing between “*the medicine*” (*la medicina*) and “*the science*” (*la ciencia*) whereby “*la medicina*” applies to white and green magic associated with healing whilst “*la ciencia*” applies to red and black magic associated with *brujería*. Yet Shamanism as a whole is also sometimes referred to as “*the spiritual science*” (“*la ciencia espiritual*”) as it was by both Don Luco and El Espiritista, “*the divine science*” (“*la ciencia divino*”) or even “*the occult*”

(hidden) *science*” (“*la ciencia oculta*”), a phrase El Espiritista would use without negative connotations. My research evidence suggests that these differences in terminology are simply a reflection of dialectical variations or slight variations in belief and practice across the region. What is agreed upon by mestizo *ayahuasqueros*, despite these possible differences, is that *pactos* are associated with demonic spirits, indeed with the Devil himself, as was explained to me most clearly and fully by El Maestro.

I interviewed El Maestro one day outside his family home in the centre of Jenaro Herrera. We sat on the doorstep on wire rocking chairs (as used in ceremony) facing each other to avoid the noise inside where his grandchildren played in the large open room of his house. The house is positioned in the centre of one of the main streets in the town across from the chicken diner (*polleria*). It is large and noticeably concrete in comparison to the wooden houses that almost all inhabitants of the town live in, yet reasonably humble considering it houses several generations of El Maestro’s family. The sound of children playing and often *cumbia* (Peruvian music) emanates from the house while older family members sit outside talking to each other and passers-by throughout the days and evenings, as is customary for locals to do.

Our conversation developed from my questions about El Maestro’s shamanic teacher and his passing. Although his teacher was a Master shaman who practiced *medicina*, according to El Maestro, he died at the age of 89 because of a pact he made with the Devil many years before to cure an illness he was suffering from:

“He made a contract with the devil until 89 years: mild illness, or hang yourself or shoot yourself. This is the contract of the science. Three things: it will take you by gradual illness, or you hang yourself or you shoot yourself. You are giving your spirit to occult science, to the real Devil, my child, to the science ... and this was fulfilled, and he is dead.”

He chose to die by illness and so it was that he died in this way. This is effectively selling one's soul to the Devil, as El Maestro emphasized. This example is representative of the fine line between 'light' and 'dark' in mestizo shamanism and the fact that individual practitioners can engage with both sides.

Another pact with the Devil, El Maestro recalled, was made by his peer. This man apparently agreed to a pact with the Devil "*to take the hearts out of 30 small children and 30 adults to gain power quickly, so he began killing people for this*". He explained that he was shot dead by a Matsés man, an indigenous community with settlements in the nearby region, before completing the contract.³⁴

El Maestro explained that whereas the Devil requires your life, "*with the plants it is not like this: you call and they come.*" El Maestro works mainly with trees (*palos*) alongside ayahuasca, further explaining:

"The trees are the medicinal spirits. With the trees, you do not have such a contract with your life, you are going to live with enough, and with science it is a contract, whether you like it or not, you are already delivered, and it takes you if it takes you."

Whilst he suggests that the trees are life giving and help to provide for their shamanic allies in the human realm, contracts within *la ciencia* require your life and once made, cannot be broken. He also distinguished between the effect of white and red magic on the person saying: "*with the medicine you feel God, all white, and with the red you feel all your body... like it's on fire and you want to kill*". This explanation, focusing on the body, highlights the

³⁴ I have heard different versions of this story: some say he was killed because he was harming people including the wife of the man who killed him; others allege that he was having an affair with her; whilst some say he was doing healing work that was misunderstood, and others that he was killed for territorial reasons for being on what the Matsés deemed as their land.

centrality of the body for negotiating relations between the shamanic practitioner and spiritual entities and allies, as we saw in the practice of *dieta*.

Demonic spirits from the realms of black and red magic said to have engaged in *pactos* with shamans dominate or have power and mastery over the person, stealing life energy, rather than providing it. *Pactos* are concerned with self-interest and preservation, based on the desire to preserve one's life, or to achieve power and status as an individual. Something must be given, which in the above examples at least, is life, in return for their assistance. *Pactos* may also be established for the purpose of gaining women and money. The crux of the difference between these paths for the shamanic apprentice lies in his/her negotiation of relations with non-human beings, which for the mestizo practitioner are envisaged within a Christian hierarchy of spirits.

Western Seekers' Cosmologies

Evengia Fotiou's research found that most Western ayahuasca seekers described themselves as "*spiritual but not religious*" (Fotiou 2010). My research found that many were brought up in Christian families but had later rejected Christianity and wider religion in favour of 'spirituality'. Many others had been atheist for most of their lives before gaining an interest in spiritual exploration and practices.

In one example, a 36-year-old American apprentice-volunteer apprentice and facilitator at Don Luco's centre explained, "*I drink Ayahuasca to connect with God*". Having been a practicing Christian and church-goer for many years, she had left the Church in her teens feeling disillusioned and "*disconnected from God*", before finding ayahuasca and shamanic practice. It was through ayahuasca that she experienced what she recalled as "*my first real spiritual experience*." She explained:

“I realised OK this is God, this is the connection to God, I could see that clearly, I could feel it, I could feel myself as part of God.”

This example is demonstrative of the distinction typically drawn by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism between Church and spiritual practice, also present within the views and practice of many mestizo shamans, as discussed. Her description of God being non-dualistic is also connected with the influence of Eastern spirituality and philosophy. Another example from my interviews with Western participants is:

“God is everything, and I mean everything, what you feel, what you touch, what you see. God manifests itself in every single way. ... so I am God and you are God as far as I’m concerned, there’s no separation.”

The influence of Eastern spirituality upon many Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism is also evidenced by different aspects of their behaviour including daily practices such as meditation; yoga and the chanting of *mantras*; dress exhibiting spiritual symbols such as the *Om*; and diet, often being vegetarian or vegan and in some cases specifically following *ayurvedic* tradition. Many participants in ayahuasca retreats have previously travelled to Asia, especially India and Nepal, also considered havens for Western spiritual seekers, and some have participated in other kinds of spiritual retreats and healing or lived for periods in ashrams.

According to the Western gaze, ayahuasca shamanism represents an alternative to religious practice and dogma, considered a relic of “authentic” spiritual practice, typically positioned as the precursor to religion by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism, as an English apprentice explained:

“Spirituality gave birth to these traditions like the different mystery schools that gave birth to modern religions, but it all began with man’s spiritual quest; the religions went away from the tradition and true spirituality without the dogma.”

Indeed, for many Western participants, engagement in ayahuasca shamanism is part of a ‘spiritual quest’, perceived as the above explanation conveys as involving the discovery of ancient wisdom that is untarnished by the subsequent construction of religion.

‘Spirituality’, and by association shamanism, is typically conceived of by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism as liberating as opposed to oppressive and binding. One of my research participants, an editor and publisher, pointed to the etymology of the word ‘religion’, meaning, he said, “*that thing to which you are bound or attachment, ligature, ligament, “to bind”*”. In contrast, the spiritual self is typically conceived of by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism in similar terms to how the secular self, as outlined by Asad (2003), has been conceived of as sovereign and free in opposition to ‘the constraints of that self by religious discourses’ (*ibid.*:16). In line with this depiction, individual autonomy, ‘direct access’ (in this case to spiritual knowledge and experience) and ‘the alleged absence of hierarchy’ (*ibid.*: 5) are of paramount importance.

One of my research participants, a Scottish man in his early 40s was a returning visitor to the Iquitos region who had engaged in two ayahuasca retreats in previous years before his longer stay at El Espiritista’s centre during my fieldwork where he completed an ayahuasca retreat involving three ceremonies and an eight - day plant *dieta*. Having been a devout Christian for many years of his life, he spoke at length during his interview about his conversion from religion to ‘spirituality’ as he conceptualised it, which had been provoked by an interest in shamanism and later engagement in ayahuasca shamanism, as he recalled:

“...and that’s when I started thinking about spiritual rather than religious, reading a lot about the spirit in shamanic practice, and I saw that this was different than what I’d been presented with before, realising that there was no spirit in religion...”

Within this ‘spirituality’, everything is alive with spirit. He went on to describe how he speaks to the water each day to ask it to cleanse himself in the shower:

“to a religious person that sounds stupid but to a spiritual person that makes sense, so that opens up a whole new world and you see the world in a different light... you speak to the trees, you speak to your food before you eat it. There is spirit in everything.”

According to this view then, spirituality has similarities with animism so the appeal of Amazonian animism involving plant spirits is understandable within this context.

He described his transition from Christianity to ‘spirituality’ in liberatory terms:

“As far as I’m concerned religion is limited to a specific doctrine or specific belief system and therefore it’s almost like a control system, like a herd of sheep being controlled by the sheepdog the sheepdog, being the minister, the head of that fold, and the sheep although they’re safe and everything’s all nice, it’s limited to that doctrine, and in my experience it’s even you’re not allowed to do this or that and for the safety of the sheep. Sometimes it’s a good thing, but it’s just man-made rules at the end of the day, and in my experience there’s no help, there’s only the physical , practical help from the Church from the minister and from the people that you’re around, there was no, I didn’t have an experience of spiritual help in that way or doctrine or fold, and I’ve tried a few folds, but since becoming more spiritual and accepting spirituality and accepting that I am a spiritual being, I came to realise that the help, it’s limitless and you can call on the spiritual world at any time.”

Through his ayahuasca experiences he was able to overcome what he saw as the limitations of religion, furthermore, limitations enforced by religious leaders over their ‘flock’, as his allusion to the traditional Christian metaphor of shepherd and sheep conveys. Furthermore, the importance of direct access to spiritual guidance is paramount, and so in this light the attraction of the spirit of ayahuasca itself becomes clear.

Direct spiritual experience is typically understood by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism in contrast to religion through which spiritual experience is mediated; moreover, through traditionally male religious leaders or “gate-keepers”, a term used negatively within Western ayahuasca circles to refer to guardians of spiritual knowledge. Yet, preconceptions of ayahuasca shamanism as enabling direct, unmediated access to spiritual knowledge are not

in line with local beliefs and practice. As male dominance of the practice and industry suggests, and as the importance of Christian cosmology, shamanic agency, and the *maestro*/apprentice relationship portrays, Westerners' preconceptions about shamanism as a spiritual practice devoid of hierarchies of power are not in harmony with the reality of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism.

Re-interpreting Christianity

Several retreat participants throughout my fieldwork raised questions about Christian elements of practice in ceremonial settings during their initial encounters with the ceremonial space and ritual. Whereas Christian icons are sometimes hidden by some local practitioners in the presence of *gringos* (Fotiou 2010) - and are usually absent in Westernized centres to align with Westerners' expectations of local practice and widely held aversion to religion, in local urban settings, as described above, they were openly displayed on ritual *mesas*.

In Don Luco and El Espiritista's ceremonial houses, where I spent the majority of my fieldwork, Christian items were few but openly displayed. The figure of Jesus on the cross hanging above Don Luco's ritual mesa always attracted the attention of some retreat participants during introductions to the space, who asked - as I had - about Don Luco's allegiance to the Christian religion. El Espiritista's ritual *mesa* containing a Christian cross and the more obvious use of *oraciones* (prayers) to Christian figures during a ceremony would attract similar attention from visitors during retreats. Uncomfortable reactions to these elements of ceremony from newcomers in retreats were quite common. These reactions reflect the ethnocentric views that most Western participants carry with them when they first arrive in the Amazon. Yet, despite initial reactions, in follow-up interviews some of my research participants reported feeling "*more comfortable*" in retrospect because of the "*familiarity*" of these ritual elements.

Indeed, although Christian elements of practice were off-putting at first for many Western research participants, as they became more experienced through engagement in mestizo ayahuasca ritual, some developed a positive relationship with these elements and Christian spirits specifically. A case in point is that of the Scottish male ayahuasca retreat participant at El Espiritista's centre, whom we met in the previous section, who had rejected his Christian religion following years of practice in favour of 'spirituality'. However, he went on to explain how he regained a sense of connection with Christian spirits through his ayahuasca experiences and was able to re-incorporate them into his cosmivision. Recalling his very first ceremony, he said:

"First night I was hearing the shaman talk about jesu cristo. He had a great connection with archangel Michael and there was other spiritual connotations with what was being said and in the icaros, and although I had a deep satisfaction in that ceremony I had a questioning opinion about what are all these spirits...I asked about this in the post ceremony discussion the next day and the shamans explained that they call on these spirits as helpers. The fact there were also plant spirits as well as Christian ones like Jesus helped me to believe it."

Of particular interest here is the admission that his acceptance of these spirits was made easier by the fact that the shamans were also calling on plant spirits as helpers. His greater openness to plant spirits, due to his lack of negative associations with them and openness to animistic beliefs, facilitated therefore his re-acceptance of Christian figures, a process guided also by the shamans leading ceremony in whom he placed respect. In this way we can see how for some, in the context of mestizo practice, and in the hands of mestizo shamans, ayahuasca becomes a facilitator of reconnection with Christian spirits. Furthermore, it might be said that mestizo shamanic practice provides a bridge between religion and spirituality for some Western participants and practitioners.

Becoming more engrained in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, Western practitioners and apprentices of mestizo *ayahuasqueros* work within Christian cosmologies as their teachers

do, whilst largely remaining averse to institutionalised religion. For them, ayahuasca shamanism is considered an acceptable form of Christian practice that is dissociated from institutionalised forms and their perceptions of Christianity previously. These apprentices act as cultural as well as linguistic translators. Therefore, the role involves explaining Christian elements of practice to Western ceremonial and retreat participants, a part I played during my time with Don Luco. Recalling my similar aversion to Christian elements initially, I would explain that “*Don Luco is Catholic but not Catholic in the way we understand it.*” Similarly, El Espiritista’s English apprentice would explain that they worked within a Christian cosmology but that he and his *maestro* (and other mestizo shamans in the region) were aligned with “*Mystical Christianity*”, which he explained, is very different from the Church based practices with which Western participants are more familiar. I only heard this definition of “*Mystical Christianity*” used by Western apprentices rather than their mestizo teachers. The definition clearly incorporates spirituality with Christianity, representing for the Western participant how mestizo ayahuasca shamanism incorporates both. It would seem within mestizo shamanism that no such definition would exist as Christianity and spirituality are not distinct categories.

This apprentice had a life-long dislike for the Christian Church but had embraced the mestizo ayahuasca tradition. He associated ayahuasca shamanism with Christian Mysticism including various forms of occult spiritual traditions such as Rosicrucianism and Hermeticism. Mystical Christianity, typically associated with Catholicism (McBrien 1995), centres around hidden religious ritual and is focused on direct experience rather than scriptural doctrine (McGinn 2006), features that can indeed be observed within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism. The tradition of Rosicrucianism is clearly embedded in Iquitos history and shamanism, with the deceased Iquitos Rosicrucian, Oscar Rosindo Pizarro, a spiritual ally for some *ayahuasqueros* (Beyer 2009:334), many of whom themselves identify as Rosicrucians, as El Espiritista does.

Stated connections with ancient esoteric teachings claiming to reveal authentic Christianity among some mestizo shamans may be understood partly as attempts to validate their practices against a backdrop of criticism from Catholic and other Christian Churches.

Emphasising to me and to interested retreat participants- that occult literally means “*hidden*” and does not necessarily refer to “*dark*” practices and witchcraft with which the word is often associated, El Espiritista’s apprentice suggested that shamanic knowledge is connected with long traditions of hidden practice based on secret teachings passed down through generations of apprentices or “*initiates*” within these “*mystery schools*”. This knowledge he explained, is protected by layers of knowledge sometimes disguised within different systems of belief and practice. So, he suggested, what may appear to be Catholicism is really a “*smokescreen*” for something more secret. The framing of Christian elements of practice in this way enables the apprentice to embrace Christian elements of practice whilst retaining his therefore non-contradictory aversion to Christian church-based religion, and indeed, also encourages Western retreat participants at their centre to do the same. His perspective is also supported by the evidence that El Espiritista would identify as Catholic in the company of family members, whilst retaining a more open spiritually diverse perspective which he would share with apprentices.

There are other Western practitioners who have retained their Christian identity from childhood yet remain inclusive in their outlook and shamanic practice. A European *ayahuasquera* and psychologist in Iquitos defines herself as Christian explaining, “*it’s important for me as it’s my roots and also the love message of the Christ is very important for me*” but she emphasises that retreat guests from all religions and none are welcome at her retreat centre and recalled happily having one group including Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and atheist participants. Despite her own religious identity, she distinguishes between shamanism and religion saying: “*shamanism is not a religion it’s an experience, you can have your own*

experience, perhaps you will meet Jesus, or Buddha, or a tree...” thus emphasising the openness and inclusivity of shamanism in her view. Within touristic contexts this openness and inclusivity is critical for attracting the participation of Westerners, but I would argue, it is also a hallmark of mestizo shamanism that due to the openness and adaptability of mestizo cosmology, mestizo shamans are able to consciously negotiate their religious and spiritual frames of reference to accommodate Western participants.

Hybrid Forms

Mestizo cosmology incorporates different religious and spiritual influences, predominantly Catholic, but also ancient esoteric, and Eastern in its present form in touristic settings in the Iquitos region. In this section I will address how Eastern influences feature within mestizo cosmology, ritual and wider practice in touristic ayahuasca settings in the Iquitos region, emphasizing the adaptability of mestizo cosmology and the agency of mestizo shamans in negotiating between different cosmological frames of reference. Then, focusing on the concept of “Mother” or “*Madre*” within mestizo ritual and cosmology - as an ‘equivocal “homonym”’ (De Castro 2004) and locus of ‘ritual misunderstanding’ (Losonczy & Mesturini Capps 2014) in touristic ayahuasca contexts - my analysis reveals how multiple and sometimes contradictory cosmological perspectives can exist within this hybrid cultural context.

Eastern Influences

As complementary practices, it is now quite common to find yoga sessions and meditation practice included as part of ayahuasca retreat schedules in Westernized retreat lodges in the Iquitos region, as co-ordinated by retreat centre owners and facilitators. I also witnessed the singing of *mantras* by Western participants during ceremonies under the guidance of mestizo shamans, usually at the invitation of Western apprentices and assistants. In one nontypical

case an English rainforest landowner who established an eco-spiritual community near Iquitos was previously a Hindu Sadhu in India. According to his version of events, the landowner left this role after seven years of overseeing 12 ashrams due to what he saw as hypocrisy within the religious leadership. Having already abandoned Christianity as a teenager due to “*hypocrisy*” in the Church, he then abandoned religion completely and found himself involved in psychedelic festival culture in Europe finding “*spirituality out there...it’s not that bad, more people are waking up.*” He found out about Peru and ayahuasca through a friend and this led him to Iquitos where he eventually set up a community that mixes spiritual practices including ayahuasca ceremony with Eastern inspired teachings and elements as is usual within the Western spiritual movement, which includes ‘psychedelic shamanism’ alongside paganism and eastern philosophy (Heelas & Woodhead 2005).

Yet, Eastern influences are also consciously incorporated by mestizo shamans. Some local mestizo *ayahuasqueros* advise retreat participants to engage in meditation practice, including Don Luco, who also claimed to practice meditation occasionally himself. He and El Espiritista both exhibited an understanding of the Hindu-derived chakra system and could communicate with ceremonial and retreat participants regarding the clearing or opening of *chakras* should retreat participants present them with questions or self-observations in these terms, and also occasionally unprompted. The use of this language is evidence of their sensitivity to Eastern spirituality and Westerners’ points of reference. This sensitivity was also exhibited in the example of El Espiritista’s description of God quoted earlier in this chapter, mirroring that of Western participants in my research influenced by Eastern spirituality and philosophies of non-dualism.

More striking was when Don Luco himself sang a song during ceremony addressed to “*Buddha*” asking for the Buddha’s “*blessings*” (*bendiciones*) and “*wisdom*” (*salvidoria*). When I commented on this the next day, he told me he had sung this because of my

connection with *Buddha*. This was not something we had discussed at length previously, but he was aware I had travelled to China and Thailand when I was very young because of my father's work and that I had a long and on-going interest in Buddhism. Despite having a minimal understanding of Buddhism and limited interest, his inclusion of this song shows an inclusive attitude toward religious figures and teachings, including Buddha alongside Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary in his ceremonial practice and therefore treating the Buddha with similar respect. Apparently through my connection Don Luco was able to connect with the spirit of Buddha as he connects directly with the spirit of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary or indeed the many plant spirits he also calls through song. Therefore, through the participation of Western people and the connections they carry with them, Buddha becomes another spiritual ally within his plethora of spirits. In this way we see how the incorporation of outsider influences and beliefs can be understood as strengthening for the mestizo *ayahuasquero*.

Eastern influences are also present within El Espiritista's practice, as a song he occasionally uses for the purpose of healing (*sanación*), demonstrates, in which he calls to the temple of India ("*Shamooore shamooore el templo de la India*"). Interestingly, his apprentice explained that his maestro's connections with Indian spirituality did not stem from any physical travel to the region, either his own or that of his apprentices, or indeed from their personal interests, but rather, that they stem from his initiation within the "*mystery schools*". So, the suggestion is that Eastern influences are also integrated into mestizo shamanism through spiritual knowledge sharing that goes beyond personal connections in the human realm, and indeed, as is also attractive to most Western participants, beyond the framework of religion, perceived of as limiting. "The Mother"

The current emphasis on the 'Mother' spirit of Ayahuasca in Westernized contexts is closely connected to widespread rejection of organised monotheistic religion, and specifically

Christianity, amongst Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism. Indeed, the mother figure is traditionally a more loving archetype than the more authoritarian Father God, and furthermore, a directly oppositional figure which personifies the Western audience's affront to patriarchal religion and offers an alternative route through which to engage in spiritual practice.

Furthermore, my research evidences that much greater emphasis is given to "*Madre Ayahuasca*" by *ayahuasqueros* working with Westerners in touristic contexts than in local contexts where more emphasis is placed on the Christian Father God. This comparison applies to spoken communication with ceremonial participants, as well as ceremonial practice involving *icaros* addressed to 'Mother Ayahuasca'. The ease with which mestizo shamans have adapted their practice to accommodate Western sensibilities is plausibly related to the significance of the Virgin Mary within mestizo cosmology.

The Virgin Mary is a significant figure within mestizo shamanism alongside the Catholic trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The cult of the Virgin Mary within Catholicism created an idealised figure of 'the mother' that it could be said has been reframed and similarly represented through 'the cult' of 'Mother Ayahuasca' within the Western ayahuasca community. Prayers addressed to and including reference to the Virgin Mary are very common within local mestizo ceremonial practice. An example of one of La Doctora's *oraciones* is as follows:

*"Glory to the father to the son and the holy Spirit
I beg you señor
Have compassion for your children who love you and we always ask you for your blessing
Blessed be your purity and eternally be it because an entire god is recreated in such graceful beauty
to you,
Celestial Virgin sacred Maria I offer you at this time soul life and heart,
look at me with compassion do not leave me my Mother."*

The spirit of the Virgin Mary is comparable to or even interchangeable for some practitioners with the spirit of Mother Ayahuasca within ceremonial practice. One of Don Luco's favourite ceremonial songs welcomes the coming of Christ and the Virgin Mary:

*“Here comes, here comes,
Our father, Jesus Christ,
Here comes, here comes,
Our Mother, the Virgin Mary.”*

El Maestro also sings this prayer in ceremony. Whilst in ceremonies with his family and shamanic group in Jenaro Herrera he sings the same lyrics as Don Luco, in ceremonies with “gringos”, he replaces Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary with “*Nuestra Madre Ayahuasca*” (‘our Mother Ayahuasca’) and “*la medicina*” (‘the medicine’). This example is clearly demonstrative of how ceremonial practice is adapted by shamans according to the needs and beliefs of ceremonial participants, with ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ becoming preferable to the Virgin Mary (and other Christian figures) within touristic contexts.

Furthermore, assumptions might sometimes lead to misinterpretations of ceremonial practice among Western participants. Indeed, Don Luco clarified for me one day that when he refers to ‘the mother’ (“*la Madre*”) in ceremony, he is usually referring to the *Madona*, not, as most Western participants might assume, to ‘Mother Ayahuasca.’ This is a significant statement that highlights a point of dissonance between mestizo and Western perspectives but is also representative of how mestizo ayahuasca practice withstands and facilitates different interpretations and spiritual perspectives.

Building on Losonczy & Mesturini Cappelletti’s framework of ‘ritualized misunderstanding’ (Losonczy & Mesturini Cappelletti 2014) of which this is an example, my research suggests that mestizo shamans negotiate this misunderstanding consciously, choosing usually to ignore the disparity between Westerners’ interpretations of “Mother” in touristic contexts and the local and personal significance of their ritual practice, thus accommodating Westerners’ expectations and the demands of commercialisation while honouring their own beliefs and mestizo tradition.

I suggest also that Don Luco's clarification about the identity of "*la Madre*" in this instance is related to the greater ambiguity of the figure of 'Mother Ayahuasca' for mestizo shamans in contrast to the Virgin Mary, and in contrast to commercial characterisations of 'Mother Ayahuasca' as a wholly benevolent entity. This clarification is considered important for those immersed in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, such as apprentices, whereas can be ignored for the benefit of transient participants in ayahuasca retreats, as also demonstrated in the previous chapter with regards to ayahuasca's gender. These subtle adaptations in communication are orchestrated through the agency of mestizo shamans working in this context.

Conclusion

As a syncretic practice involving communication with earthly as well as heavenly spirits including figures from the Christian pantheon, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism incorporates colonial and other outsider influences, such as concepts from Eastern spirituality, whilst also retaining native cosmology and practice. Spirituality is opposed to religion for many Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism, as animism is typically opposed to monotheistic Christian cosmology. Yet, contrary to these outsider perspectives, within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, these cosmologies can exist side by side converging and interacting.

Furthermore, as discussed in this chapter, figures and concepts from Eastern spirituality are also present within the contemporary practice of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, influenced partly by the relatively recent participation of Western apprentices and participants, yet also, according to shamans and apprentices, through the influence of 'mystery school' traditions spanning time and space. Ayahuasca thus emerges as a vehicle for human and spiritual connections and is experienced as a communicator of spiritual knowledge within and between human and non-human realms, and indeed across other conceivably dualistic boundaries including religion/spirituality; and 'light'/'dark'. Catholicism is compatible with shamanism

in mestizo Amazonia (in contrast to Evangelicalism) While some Catholics do not accept shamanism as valid spiritual practice in the Iquitos region, many of them do, and most mestizo *ayahuasqueros* identify as *Catolico* at least some of the time, some emphatically. Yet, as the preceding discussion has shown, for Western ayahuasca participants, this identification is often in conflict with perceptions of Catholicism, that are identified with Church authority and dogmatism, and church-based ritual. Being *catolico* or *cristiano* for mestizo *ayahuasqueros* is part of their national and local identity yet encompasses varied spiritual perspectives and expressions of practice. Indeed, within Latin America at least, Catholicism seems to function as a hybrid religion in and of itself, enabling the incorporation of varied beliefs and practices, hence its enduring success. Mestizo shamanism, in relation, functions similarly, through its incorporation of external influences and knowledge, a source of resistance and power.

There is no doubt that mestizo cosmology is still deeply embedded in Christian cosmology. Although many transient Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism remain unaware of or adverse to Christian elements of ayahuasca shamanism, many Western apprentices are already, or become, immersed within mystical Christian hierarchies during the process of apprenticeship. My research suggests that this is an essential precursor to becoming initiated within the mestizo tradition in the Iquitos region. Indeed, an understanding of these cosmological systems is integral for distinguishing between ‘light’ and ‘dark’ spirits within mestizo shamanic cosmology, and therefore acquiring spiritual allies on the way to learning to practice *curanderismo* (healing) and/or *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft). On the other hand, my research evidences that *ayahuasqueros* involved in international ayahuasca networks working with Western apprentices and in touristic centres are likely to exhibit interest in varied spiritual approaches.

It is indeed significant to observe how Western apprentices carrying Eastern influenced philosophies and anti-religious beliefs work harmoniously with local *ayahuasqueros* who are heavily influenced by Christianity. Thus, I wish to emphasise that the examples in this chapter demonstrate that such apparently diverse views, spiritual figures and practices drawn from different religious and spiritual traditions are able to exist side by side within the realm of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, almost it seems, without conflict. This is largely due to the openness and adaptability of mestizo cosmology as well as the agency of shamans and apprentices in negotiating their own position and relations with human and non-human others in this hybrid space. *Ayahuasqueros* working in the ayahuasca industry and their apprentices adjust the focus of their system of reference to better reflect the Western imaginary.

Ceremonial practices are adapted by mestizo practitioners to mirror participants' spiritual preferences, a key example being 'Mother Ayahuasca' becoming more prominent in touristic settings than the father God more typically called on in local practice. Emphasis on the female figure of Mother Ayahuasca in touristic ayahuasca ceremonies has clearly become more pronounced through encounters with Western perspectives, influenced by commercialisation and the authority and direction of Western centre owners who wish to uphold and promote the commodified version of 'Mother Ayahuasca', but also due, I argue, to the sensibilities of *ayahuasqueros* to these perspectives.

As well as being a fitting alternative to the Father God for Western clientele, representative of their broadly eco-feminist concerns, 'Mother Ayahuasca' has in some cases replaced the Virgin Mary in mestizo ceremonial practice. Sometimes it seems, these figures may even be considered as alternative interpretations (mestizo/Western) of the same concept of pure nurturing and divine motherhood, while within mestizo cosmology the ayahuasca spirit is considered a much more ambiguous, morally neutral entity. Contrary to the commercial emphasis on Mother Ayahuasca's agency, presented as exclusively positive and focused on

healing, local perspectives emphasise rather, the importance of shamanic agency through which ayahuasca's potentialities as an agent of harm, healing and wider usages, are mediated. The next chapter will address "the dark side" of ayahuasca shamanism and the related eclipsing of *brujería* aspects of practice in its marketing to Western participants as well as developing manifestations of *brujería* within the context of the ayahuasca industry.

Chapter Seven: The “Dark Side” of Ayahuasca Shamanism

This chapter will explore the persistence of *brujería* (witchcraft/sorcery) within the ayahuasca industry, sometimes referred to as “*the dark side*” by Western actors. Contrary to the romanticized perceptions of many Western participants, fuelled by representations of ayahuasca shamanism disseminated through the ayahuasca industry and wider popular culture, shamanic warfare remains at the core of contemporary practices of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, which involves *brujería* as well as healing, both being integral interconnected parts of mestizo shamanic practice, historically and to the present day.

The local distinction between *curanderos* (healers) and *brujos* (sorcerers), which can be applied to *ayahuasqueros*, *vegetalistas* and other shamanic practitioners is significant here. Yet it is arguable that all shamans are *brujos*, dependant on positionality in the dynamic relational field of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, involving acts of attack and defence.

The commercialisation of ayahuasca shamanism has arguably contributed to *brujería* within the ayahuasca industry. My discussion in this chapter will address how *brujería* elements of practice manifest within the contemporary ayahuasca industry in the context of shamanic warfare centring around battles for power, money and women. I also describe developing perceptions of *brujería* among Western participants, from the disbelief often typical of outsiders and transient participants, to the incorporation of local cultural belief systems through immersion in ayahuasca networks in Iquitos, to novel interpretations of *brujería* by Western practitioners engaged in healing trauma and mental health problems and influenced by non-dualistic spiritual frameworks. Furthermore, I argue that the eclipsing of *brujería* elements of practice by the commercial ayahuasca industry may actually have had the effect of exacerbating its occurrences.

What is *Brujería*?

Within mestizo Amazonian shamanism the term *brujería* applies to witchcraft and sorcery elements of practice. Although anthropologists have sought to distinguish between witchcraft and sorcery in other geographical areas, as Evans-Pritchard did for the Azande/Zande in Africa, arguing that the sorcerer uses medicines and ritual magic whilst the witch uses ‘hereditary psycho-physical powers’ (Evans-Pritchard 1937:387), no such distinction can be applied to Amazonian cultures (Whitehead & Wright 2004:3). As Langdon has argued, ‘acts of secret aggression in Amazonian cultures defy the labels of sorcery or witchcraft as defined by the African model, and the terms have been frequently used interchangeably, emptying their analytical value as universal categories’ (Langdon 1992: 306). I use the local term *brujería* in my ethnography as it is used by international as well as local participants in the Iquitos context to apply to various kinds of witchcraft and sorcery.

Indeed, within the Iquitos ayahuasca community context the term *brujería* seems to have various meanings depending on its context of use and applies to different acts involved in harming and shamanic warfare. Locally, a distinction is drawn between “*mal aires*”, *hechiceria* and *brujería*. *Mal aire* is literally translated as ‘bad air’ referring to negative spirits which are associated with the bones of pagans or ‘ancient ones’ from pre - Christian times, and typically connected with *susto* (fright) commonly diagnosed among babies and children (Taussig 1987: 370). As described by Haydée Seijas for the Sibundoy Indians (1969), *mal aire* is considered an ‘impersonal agent’ and therefore asocial and amoral, typically affecting the young who are not socially or morally accountable. This is in contrast to *hechiceria* and *brujería*, which are acts of human agency. *Hechiceria* is – the casting of a curse or spell, enacted by an individual against another, often involving the use of the intended victim’s clothing or a piece of their hair, for example. Knowledge of *hechiceria* is

quite common within mestizo communities and it is possible to buy books from local book sellers in Iquitos containing *hechicería* spells.

Brujería or sorcery (also known as *shitana*) is conducted by a *brujo*, typically involving the throwing of *virotos* (magical pathogenic darts) to inflict harm, killing, and acts of shamanic warfare. *Brujería* is usually enacted by local people through the hiring of a professional *brujo*. Both *hechicería* and *brujería* may result in *daño* (magically inflicted harm), and in some cases can even cause the death of the victim. (Dobkin de Rios 1972:86; Beyer 2009: 137-8).

Virotos are magical pathogenic darts stored in a shaman's phlegm, the physical substance within a shaman's body (usually their chest or stomach) conceptualized throughout the Upper Amazon as containing their power or *fuera* in the form of plant spirit allies and *virotos* and/or other magical objects and substances such as snakes, stones, scorpions, insects, and crystals, used for both attack and defence (Beyer 2009: 81-2). Mestizo shamans' pathogenic weapons are most typically conceptualised as *virotos*, a term originally denoting a crossbow bolt used by Spanish conquistadors and applied by them to blowgun darts used by Indians. *Virotos* are usually projected by blowing often with the aid of tobacco smoke or may be projected from the shaman's body, traversing any distance to reach their victim, or implanted in food or left to be stepped on, upon intrusion causing debilitating sickness and sometimes death (*ibid.* 84 -5).

Complementary Opposites

Within Amazonian shamanism healing and sorcery are considered indivisible 'complementary opposites' (Whitehead & Wright 2004:3). Native belief systems across Amazonia connect illness and misfortune with sorcery, inflicted by a malevolent person or non-human being, as recorded across anthropological accounts of indigenous Amazonian communities including the Campa, (Chevalier 1982:377); the Desana (Buchillet 2004: 112);

the Tukano, (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975:100, Jackson 1983: 198); the Cubeo, (Goldman 1979:266); the Yagua (Chaumeil 1983, 2000: 251-252); the Waiwai (Mentore 2004: 142); and the Marubo (Lagrou 2004: 249). Similarly, within mestizo Amazonian society, healing and *brujería* are inextricably linked (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Taussig 1987; Beyer 2009). Local mestizo ‘folk healing’ practices connect the causes of illness with witchcraft attacks and within which healing *brujería* traditionally involves sending the malady that has been inflicted – usually in the form of a *virote*– back to the sender (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Beyer 2009; Brabec de Mori 2014). Within mestizo communities, illnesses are almost invariably understood to be caused by other people due to feelings most commonly defined as *envidia* (envy) and given expression through the use of *brujería* (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Taussig 1987; Glass-Coffin 2001; Beyer 2009). The accused are usually close neighbours, those most likely to have committed breaches of *confianza* (trust) or to bear a grudge against the victim (Beyer 2009: 144).

The Sanitization of Shamanism

‘Dark shamanism’ in Amazonia has historically received far less attention than in other ethnographic regions such as Africa, Papua New Guinea and Europe (Whitehead & Wright 2004:4), although there have been notable studies that address these elements as part of broader themes (e.g. Chaumeil 1983; Taussig 1987; Langdon 1992; Hugh-Jones 1994; Vilaca 1999). As argued by Whitehead & Wright in their collection of essays, *In Darkness and Secrecy: The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia* (2004), the tendency within Western literature on shamanism has been to ignore sorcery aspects deemed as negative and focus on the “positive”, therapeutic aspects of practice, in line with recent and growing Euro-American interest in shamanic healing and spirituality (Whitehead & Wright 2004: 1-10). Carlos Fausto is especially vocal on the subject in his contribution to this volume asserting that: ‘Amazonian shamanism is not a loving animism, as its middle-class

urban vulgate want us to believe. It is better understood as a predatory animism'; clearly lamenting the impact of Western influence, he argues that 'modern, urban, middle-class shamanism... has purged the phenomenon from all its ambiguous attributes' (Fausto 2004: 171-2).

Following Whitehead and Wright, Fotiou has argued that Westernisation and romanticization of shamanism and the rise of neoshamanic practice focused on personal healing and 'spiritual growth' is a continuation of colonial approaches entailing the denial of indigenous cultural systems of thought and practice and the subjection of the 'other' to Westernised thought and preferences, leading to the apparent 'erasure' of indigenous elements of practice (Fotiou 2016; Whitehead & Wright 2004: 1-20). Within the context of ayahuasca shamanism the influence of 'gringo apprentices' who are disapproving of *brujería* has been implicated in these developments (Brabec de Mori 2014).

Some argue that the influence of Western participation entailing an emphasis on healing has caused a genuine shift within the local practice towards healing removed from its counterpart *brujería*. As mentioned, the healing of *brujería* attacks traditionally involves sending the malady that has been inflicted – often in the form of a dart (*virote*)– back to the sender.

However, according to some *ayahuasqueros* in my research, including mestizos as well as Westerners, it is also possible to remove and heal *brujería* without the need for retaliation by sending this energy into the ether or transforming it in to light energy. Alex Gearin has reported that some Shipibo healers in Pucallpa explained this was possible with Westerners but not with local people where this energy is apparently stronger due to the prevalence of black magic in their home regions (Gearin 2022). No such distinction was made by practitioners in my research. However, it is significant to note that it was the mestizos working exclusively in local contexts within my fieldwork that argued that retaliation with *virote*s is essential to enact healing, and only some working in Westernized settings that

suggested it was possible to release *brujería* energy without retaliation against the sender. This evidence suggests that the symbiosis that traditionally exists between healing and sorcery within Amazonian shamanism (Whitehead & Wright 2004) is being loosened within touristic settings. It may be that these arguments by certain practitioners that healing can be enacted in alternative ways are representative of efforts to present their practice as acceptable to the Western audience, but my wider research suggests there is genuine disagreement between practitioners on this point that may be indicative of developments.

Clearly *brujería* is quite prevalent within Westernized ayahuasca industry contexts (Fotiou 2010; Gearin 2022; Marcus 2022). I argue that the commercialisation of ayahuasca for Western clientele, involving the commodification of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ as a purely benevolent healing spirit, has caused the eclipsing of *brujería* elements of practice, but these elements are present and indeed prevalent in the contemporary context of Iquitos, despite the façade created by Westernisation and romanticisation. Indeed, regardless of one’s preconceptions, as one becomes immersed in ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region, *brujería* becomes a reality.

The Necessary Conditions

The anthropological literature on Amazonian ‘dark shamanism’ highlights the connection between social conflict and witchcraft and sorcery allegations (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Whitehead & Wright 2004). In mestizo communities *brujería* is especially associated with the presence of envy (*envidia*) (Joralemon & Sharon 1993; Beyer 2009). Witchcraft has also been associated with intervillage and interethnic tensions and inequalities within communities, as well as with colonialism and the presence of outsiders (Langdon in Whitehead & Wright 2004; Taussig 1987; Thomas and Humphrey 1994). Indeed, a proliferation of sorcery accusations and attacks has been connected with social inequality

across various Amazonian contexts (Scott 1990:143-144; Joralemon & Sharon 1993: 264; Perruchon 2003:259) including within mestizo Amazonian communities where Beyer argues that ‘envy, expressed as sorcery suspicions and accusations, increases when distribution of wealth becomes more unequal’ (Beyer 2009: 138). These patterns continue in the present - day context of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos within which the growth of the ayahuasca industry involving an influx of outsiders and money to the region has exacerbated local inequalities (Peluso 2016). The successes of some shamans through working in the ayahuasca industry in comparison to other shamans has indeed contributed to social inequality in the locality, creating envy within local communities and competition between shamans for financial gain and status. The lure of temptation, traditionally associated with *brujería*, has increased within this context involving extensive opportunities for shamans to earn money and gain power. The greater possibility of achieving high status and economic success within the industry as opposed to within the local context of ayahuasca shamanism can clearly be seen to attract more practitioners with these motivations, as opposed to the discipline and integrity required to follow the path of *curanderismo*.

All the mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in my research emphasised that the path to becoming a *brujo* entails failure to commit to proper apprenticeship training involving dedication to plant *dieta* practice and involving the acquisition of benevolent spiritual allies required for healing, but rather, giving in to temptations from malevolent spirits for the sake of gaining personal power. As addressed in the previous chapter, agreements with malevolent spirits can lead to quickly acquired shamanic abilities and power for the individual. Indeed, it is widely said in Iquitos that you can become a *brujo* in as little as three months, but it takes far longer to become a good *curandero*.

Local *ayahuasqueros* working outside of the ayahuasca industry typically argue that *brujería* has become more prevalent since the rise of the ayahuasca industry due to a lack of

commitment by practitioners within the industry to engage in traditional *dieta* practice. For instance, the oldest *ayahuasquero* I interviewed, a 93-year-old presented to me by another local as “*the last real curandero in Iquitos*” who runs a healing practice for locals from his house in *Punchana*, having very little contact with *gringos*, was adamant that all *ayahuasqueros* working in the ayahuasca industry are *brujos*. “*They don’t know anything*”, he argued, adding that “*they don’t diet and drink alcohol regularly*”. Considering the relative lack of commitment and skill required to learn *brujería* as opposed to *curanderismo*, the temptation towards material gain, power and status available within the ayahuasca industry can be understood to have contributed to a proliferation of *brujos* across the Iquitos region.

The rise of Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism and of “*gringo shamans*” has also undoubtedly affected the way in which shamanic knowledge is shared and practice has developed more widely, with the involvement of Western apprentices disrupting traditional shamanic lineages through which shamanic knowledge is passed down through kinship orientated lines of descent, usually from father to son, almost always between familial relations, and never moving beyond local relational ties. While relationships between local *maestros* and Western apprentices are usually described as close and significant for both parties, distrust already a major problem locally, is exacerbated by cross-cultural misunderstandings and differences. Breakdowns in relations between *maestros* and apprentices are already a basis for shamanic warfare in the local context. The rise of Western apprentices conceivably creates greater potentiality for disagreements with *maestros* and therefore shamanic battle due to cross-cultural tensions.

Most insiders acknowledge that *brujería* is indeed widespread across the ayahuasca community and industry in Iquitos. As well as this being related to cross-cultural tensions, increases in social inequality, jealousy and envy, and the temptations of money and power associated with the industry, some argue that the prevalence of *brujería* in the region can in

part be explained as a backlash against an increased focus on healing due to Western participation. The suggestion is that some local practitioners may be hostile towards the Western adoption of ayahuasca shamanism for the purpose of individual healing and personal growth and may be keen to preserve their tradition of *brujería*. These perspectives are conceivably influenced by a practitioner's own position within the ayahuasca industry, as they may not be enjoying success within it, or may simply reflect annoyance with widespread misunderstanding among Western participants of local ayahuasca practice, within which healing and *brujería* are interrelated.

***Brujería* in Local Context**

In mestizo communities in the Iquitos region traditional beliefs surrounding *brujería* are persistent. *Brujería* is a reality for many local people in the Iquitos region, collectively believed in and participated in. Surprisingly perhaps, this does not exclude people who believe in and even work professionally with biomedicine. Indeed, it is not uncommon for medical doctors to consult shamans in the Iquitos region in instances where patients are not responding to hospital treatment and it is deemed that *brujería* must be the cause of their illness. Some shamans are hired by doctors at the regional hospital to fulfil this consultancy role. Indeed, many mestizos including doctors and shamans distinguish between illnesses with spiritual causes requiring shamanic healing, and illnesses with physical causes requiring biomedical healing. However, there is also growing evidence that traditional beliefs about the causes of illness and mechanisms of healing are diminishing among the local population. Don Luis and Don Orlando for example argued that there are cases of people dying from trying to treat illnesses caused by *brujería* through bio-medical means. In this context *brujería* is positioned as a 'site of resistance' (Joralemon & Sharon 1993) against the forces of capitalism and modernisation, perceived as this example reflects by some local healers as being both superior to and diminishing in power against these forces in the local context.

Local beliefs connecting the causes of illness with *brujería* (Dobkin de Rios 1992; Brabec de Mori 2014; Fotiou 2016) were present in local ceremonies in the urban context of Iquitos, and among the local population in Jenaro Herrera. In ceremonies with Don Luis and Don Orlando and Don Pedro in urban Iquitos, and consultation and ceremonies with Don Luco and El Maestro for the local population in Jenaro Herrera, the causes of illness and misfortune were almost exclusively diagnosed as either “*mal aire*”, such as a woman suffering from headaches deemed to be caused by bad energies in the place where she worked and frequent cases of *susto* among babies and toddlers; or as *daño* (harm) deemed to be caused by *brujería* sent by specific people. Healing, as argued by Taussig, is often associated with Christian salvation in mestizo tradition (Taussig 1987). A clear example of this from my research was a male patient of Don Pedro’s who had suffered many illnesses and misfortune throughout his life and was diagnosed as having been possessed by a demon since childhood, which had to be exorcised over several ceremonies involving heavy purging.

Most patients in local contexts were women, as is consistent with historical studies (Dobkin de Rios 1992; Joralemon & Sharon 1993). Examples from my research include: a woman who was suffering from body aches and fatigue deemed to be caused by the jealous ex-partner of her husband; a woman suffering from similar symptoms deemed to be caused by the mistress of her abusive partner; and a man, having recently moved towns leaving his family to couple with a young woman, who could not find work due he argued, to a curse inflicted upon him through *brujería* commissioned by his ex-partner. As these examples portray, in line with Joralemon’s research (Joralemon & Sharon 1993), my research revealed that *daño* is a means through which the harms of infidelity are expressed and negotiated, with magical harm usually deemed as caused by a jealous woman. An example shared by Fotiou has similar patterns with *brujería* sent by a man’s mistress deemed as the cause of his wife’s illness (Fotiou 2010:198).

Joralemon argues that the root cause of *daño* is *machisimo* and gender-based hierarchy supported by capitalism, with shamanism emerging as a site of resistance for women, which provides an outlet for female discontent and applies pressure through gossip on the abusive male to change their behaviour; while the gender dynamics around *daño* also have the effect of reinforcing male control with male *curanderos* in charge of managing its diagnosis and healing. I agree to some extent with this analysis but would emphasize further that it is women who are consistently charged with *brujería* even as we see in the example of the unfaithful male patient in my research whose current misfortune is blamed on his ex-partner. We might then question the idea that shamanism functions at all as a site of resistance for women when women are resoundingly the accused and when male dominance of shamanism could be said to undermine any challenge to patriarchal control. Yet, this picture of gender dynamics is further complicated when we also consider that the actions of male *curanderos* are to some extent controlled by predominantly female clients who either hire them to harm or heal.

Just as the practice of *curanderismo* is professionalised, with healing usually requiring payment (in the local practice I observed payment is delivered either in full afterwards or half before and half after healing is conducted), the practice of *brujería* is also professionalised and the hiring of *brujos* prevalent in Iquitos. One experienced Western actor in the ayahuasca community explained:

“I call ‘em drugstore brujos. People are paying them to attack people all the time. This goes on a lot in Iquitos, they don’t care who you are, you could be pregnant, a little old lady, a four – year – old kid, they don’t care, if you pay them they will attack.”

The temptation to engage in this form of practice is somewhat understandable in a poverty ridden region such as Iquitos and the wider jungle where you are unlikely to be punished by

the law and can acquire quite large sums of money through these acts and experience the power of being able to do so and ‘get away with it’.

As Beyer argues, due to the fear of *brujería* attacks motivated by *envidia* (envy), *brujería* effectively functions as ‘a form of social control, enforcing norms of humility, lack of ostentation, and generosity’ (Beyer 2009: 142). Joralemon argues that accusations of sorcery are not just a vehicle for expressing discontent caused by social inequality and dissipating social conflict but on the other hand, actually have the effect of intensifying conflict (Joralemon & Sharon 1993). While this was less evident in local contexts in my research at least on the surface, it was evidenced more in touristic settings.

Brujería in the Ayahuasca Industry

Shamanic Warfare and the Dangers of ‘Shaman Shopping’

One of the most memorable ceremonies I have ever participated in was with El Maestro, his brother, his son, and granddaughter, who was sixteen at the time, and several Western participants for whom I was the contact. During this ceremony El Maestro’s granddaughter was in some distress and was frightened by a vision she had, as she informed her grandfather. At one point she fell suddenly from her chair beside me on to the floor in the centre of the ceremonial circle. She began lashing about on the floor and hissing as though possessed. I got down on the floor to help her, concerned that she would injure her head as she was banging it on the floor. She lashed out at me and hissed but I managed to stabilise her on the ground whilst El Maestro and his brother and son sang for her. Gradually she settled and seemed to ‘come back’ until she was able to rest.

The next day she recalled her experience of these events. She had seen an “*evil old woman*” in her vision and was afraid. Then a little later she felt what seemed like a knife in her back and this caused her to fall from her chair. She had no memory of what happened on the floor but instead experienced visions of going to the cemetery and meeting the spirits of dead relatives who were asking what she was doing there. She realised she was dying she said and was cautious not to eat anything in the vision “*because if you eat something from the spirits of the dead, you are going to stay with them*”.³⁵

The next thing she could remember she was back in the ceremonial room lying on the floor with me. She had spoken with her grandfather about what happened that morning who explained that the woman she had seen in her vision was the mother of one of his main shamanic rivals in the community, an ex-apprentice. She had attacked her to cause harm to him and his family. Another point of significance was that one of the Western participants in the ceremony had drunk ayahuasca with the rival *ayahuasquero* concerned in this instance the week previously and during El Maestro’s ceremony, she recalled feeling completely drained throughout.

This example is demonstrative of how *brujería* manifests between shamans connected with the ayahuasca industry through shamanic warfare provoked by envy and jealousy between rivals within and on the outskirts of it, related to the battle for power, status, and material wealth. As an especially powerful shaman, and a successful one who earns a lot of money professionally, El Maestro is envied by many shamanic practitioners and therefore the focus of frequent *brujería* attacks. Within the Jenaro Herrera community, although he lives quite

³⁵ This statement is indicative of how shared consumption of food translates as becoming like ‘the other’ through consumption and physical relatedness, highlighting the importance of the body as the axis of transformation between human and non-human worlds within mestizo Amazonian cosmology.

simply, he is clearly relatively wealthy compared to most other inhabitants, as his home being built from brick and concrete, as opposed to wood, and his ownership of property in the jungle reflect. His case is representative of how the ayahuasca industry has exacerbated social inequality in local communities, recognised as a causal factor for the proliferation of *brujería* attacks (Beyer 2009). It also shows how the acquisition of power and status in this relatively public context is a source of danger for practitioners attracting attention, jealousy and therefore attack.

According to insiders in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos, the attack of family members who are weaker than the targeted shaman, as in this example, is a usual course of action for *brujos*. Furthermore, it became apparent that the rival shaman may have been better able to “*enter the space*” through the presence of the tourist who had previously drunk with them (she and her son). This was also communicated to Fotiou who explained in her article on *brujería* in the region that ‘one way a shaman can interfere with a ceremony is through a participant who has been in his ceremony before and who acts as a form of psychic or energetic link’ (Fotiou 2010: 197).

This phenomenon is indicative of how the presence of Westerners in the field of ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region has contributed to occurrences of *brujería*. Indeed, the influence of consumerist style culture has created a culture of what I refer to as ‘shaman shopping’ amongst Western participants who quite typically move between shamans who often happen to be rivals in their search for the most powerful and best shaman, and teacher if they are searching for an apprenticeship. This threatens and complicates traditional territoriality and is in disregard of the local importance of loyalty to one’s shamanic lineage or group. As well as making shamans more vulnerable to attack from their rivals as in the example above, jealousy caused by ‘shaman shopping’ can also result in *brujería* attacks between rivals and their apprentices. Several of my Western research participants had

experienced being attacked by their *maestros* or previous *maestros* when they drank with a rival shaman. In this way the influence of Western participation can be seen to exacerbate the potential for spiritual battle.

As one of the most prominent and powerful *ayahuasqueros* in the region and indeed the ayahuasca industry, battles between El Maestro and his shamanic rivals in the town of Jenaro Herrera and beyond are a common occurrence. These battles are usually fought in groups, with the support of apprentices. Accounts of shamanic battles are often told with vigour and enthusiasm by apprentices showing that for some at least, they are exhilarating experiences and success in shamanic warfare is a source of pride. Battles centre around attempting to weaken El Maestro or stealing power, often in the form of plant spirit allies gained through the practice of *dieta*.

Warfare Tactics Against ‘Gringos’

The stealing of *dietas* is a common motif in shamanic warfare whereby plant spirit allies gained through dedication to *dietas* are stolen. According to insiders in the Iquitos ayahuasca community this is common practice in the region and one way in which lazy *ayahuasqueros* gain and maintain power, and furthermore, how some local *ayahuasqueros* try to ensure that not too much power is transferred to Western apprentices and participants in Amazonian shamanism. Western apprentices and participants are likely to be less aware of this potential risk due to their initial unfamiliarity with local practice. All the mestizo *ayahuasqueros* in my research warned that the stealing of *dietas* from *gringo* apprentices, as well as from transient Western participants, is widespread.

Indeed, the involvement of *gringo* apprentices and *ayahuasqueros* in mestizo shamanism is a contentious issue. Some locals in the Iquitos region question the decisions of local shamans to teach *gringos* arguing that they will “steal” this knowledge only to give back to their own

people. *Brujería* tactics are used by some practitioners to keep Western apprentices from gaining shamanic knowledge and power, and indeed, to acquire more personal power for the attacker. The potential for attack is exacerbated by movement between shamans by some Western apprentices. One tactic that is used by *maestros* and ex-*maestros* is spiritually blindfolding or blocking visions. One of my research participants claimed that his previous *maestro* had blind-folded him spiritually, so he had been unable to experience visions and make meaningful progress since. Fotiou experienced this similarly in the form of a ‘spiritual diamond’ that was placed in front of her eyes to block her visions by an *ayahuasquera* she was drinking with (Fotiou 2010: 198).

The Battle for Money

Business relationships between Western stakeholders in the ayahuasca industry and local *ayahuasqueros* are typically fraught with conflict, especially around money. Local shamans frequently complain about not being paid enough by Western centre owners, citing the high prices that are often charged for retreats, whilst Western centre owners and facilitators complain about local shamans’ greed and/or lack of professionalism, with turning up drunk for work or not turning up at all as being common issues. Certainly, some local people have been taken advantage of and under-paid by Western business owners, but similarly, there are also many instances of local shamans taking advantage of naive Westerners, over-charging them for ceremonies, and in some cases, convincing them to invest a lot of money in joint projects before effectively stealing their money.

Breakdowns in relations between Western centre owners or investors, and local *ayahuasqueros* can also lead to instances of *brujería*. In one such example, an English man who lost thousands of pounds he had invested in a centre with a local *ayahuasquero* was in a serious battle with “*el brujo*”, as he referred to him, for several years. According to his

version of events, attacks have included: bodily harm resulting in marks resembling leprosy (likely *leishmaniasis*); the stealing of his *arkana*, a shamanic protector spirit; the attempted murder of his beloved cat considered a shamanic ally; and perhaps most surprisingly, the disruption and emptying of various bank accounts by spiritual means. Battles such as this typically involve, disagreements over money and attempts to weaken one's rival through harming them physically or spiritually and stealing power, as the examples of *brujería* attacks here reflect. While a rather extreme example, tales such as this one are not considered fantastical within the context of relationships between local *ayahuasqueros* and Western apprentices and stakeholders in the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos.

Loyalty Spells – the battle for Apprentices and Women

According to Western apprentices the use of loyalty spells over apprentices by local *maestros* in the region (believed to be a kind of *pusanga*, or love magic) is common practice. There is disagreement over the morality of using *pusangas* within mestizo society as across Amazonian communities. *Pusangas* are associated with malevolence, illness and insanity, as well as with usual seduction practices (Dobkin de Rios 1985; Peluso 2003; Shepard 2016). “Loyalty spells” are widely considered immoral by Westerners and as a form of *brujería*, although nevertheless a relatively harmless form. However, beyond ensuring loyalty, *pusangas* may also be used to acquire sexual and romantic love partners in the form of female apprentices.

In one example a fellow female apprentice described being under a “spell” inflicted by her previous *maestro*. With an understanding that she was searching for a good romantic partner, he had offered to teach her love magic, which involved putting enchantments (*encantadores*) on her. This released her from feeling in love with a previous love interest leaving her feeling “neutral” towards him and other potential love interests in her life. However, she received

messages from ex partners in the period that followed, which she believed was as a direct result of the enchantments. She also described feeling overcome with the desire to “*study*” with her current *maestro* during this time. When other Westerners working with him left due to suspicions that he was sexually abusing young local patients and engaging in *brujería* tactics against his apprentices, she was also encouraged by them to leave, but during this period she “*couldn’t stop thinking about him*” and felt the desire to give him money and “*a very expensive gift*.” His other apprentice, a Western male, and his friend (who was interested in having a long-term relationship with her) told her they thought she was under a “*spell*” and was being groomed by the *maestro* to have sex with him. Having been sceptical about the existence of *brujería* previously, through immersion in ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region, her perspective had changed. She explained, “*Before thought I thought it was only in fairytales, and maybe it did exist more in that time... but it still exists here.*” The male apprentice conducted a healing on her to remove the magic in which she saw flowers with cords connected to her. Still unconvinced she was encouraged to go with the other male friend to see another *maestro* he had begun working with. This *maestro* told her she was under a spell and during a ceremony with him she saw a vision of her ex-*maestro* conducting the spell over her. She felt released from it following this experience and described “*coming back*” to herself. Recalling the experience, she was certain she had been under a spell and that her *maestro*’s motivations had been for her work with him to continue bringing Western clients, as his other apprentice was leaving, and to have sex with her. Although relieved to be free from the spell she still described what had happened as “*the most exciting thing that had ever happened in my life.*”

This example is demonstrative of several factors related to *brujería* in the ayahuasca industry. It is representative of how what is considered low level *brujería* by many may be used to secure Western apprentices and therefore access to Western clients for local *maestros*, and

how competition for Western apprentices, more likely to move between shamans than local ones, contributes to *brujería* occurrences, and indeed, accusations. The other local *maestro* who diagnosed the female apprentice as being under a spell and apparently removed it during ceremony was clearly in a position to benefit from her continued custom and potentially acquired loyalty to him.

Furthermore, such occurrences exemplify how the battle for women, specifically Western female apprentices, plays out through *brujería* attacks, accusations and healings. The first *maestro* can be understood in this scenario to have attempted to secure the female apprentice's loyalty over her loyalty to her Western male friends. The Western males were conceivably provoked to act through jealousy, threatened by their female companion's closeness to their (ex) *maestro*, and even perhaps by her potentially acquiring a more powerful position in the community through becoming his apprentice and assistant. The other *maestro* who confirmed their diagnosis and conducted the final healing can be seen to have acquired the female apprentice as a ceremonial participant and even, potential route to clients and sex. It is also conceivable that he manipulated the woman's visions so that she saw the other shaman attacking her. As well as raising questions about what constitutes *brujería* in this setting, this example is demonstrative of male control, whereby *brujería* occurrences, accusations and healing are orchestrated by and conducted by male shamans and apprentices.

Murder

I have heard it suggested by some insiders that the only true form of *brujeria* is murder.

It is quite common for shamans and apprentices in the region who are open with insiders about their engagement in shamanic warfare to state that they draw the line at murder or sometimes, physical harm. *Brujería* is associated with death within the ayahuasca industry, as also indicated by Fotiou (2010). This includes the deaths of some Western tourists such as

38-year-old Californian traveller Alfonso Geovanni D’Rose in 2016 who was found dead the morning after an ayahuasca ceremony in his individual lodging at a small retreat centre near Iquitos who some sources in the region say “got taken out” by a rival shaman of the *ayahuasquero* leading the ceremony. The potential for murder is associated with competition for money and Western clients provoking high levels of envy between shamanic rivals in the region and tensions between Western centre owners and local shamans. Western insiders argue that you have to pay local shamans who work in centres sufficiently otherwise they will not protect you or your guests properly against attack. This work comes with a high risk and therefore a high price. Some suggest that a lack of protection for ceremonial participants engaged in touristic ayahuasca retreats is connected with some of their deaths. For instance, one Western centre owner commented on a case in the locality where a man was found dead in the toilet following a ceremony, “*He got taken out*”. The reasoning for this was not made clear but my wider research evidence suggests this attack might be considered also as an attack on the *ayahuasquero* leading ceremony, or centre owner, by a rival in the region. Somewhat similarly, the death of an English man murdered by another ceremonial participant in self-defence at another centre in the region is usually blamed by insiders on a lack of proficient protection of the ceremonial space allowing for the man to become possessed by a malevolent spirit and attack the participant who eventually killed him. *Brujería* is considered such a problem for ayahuasca centres that centre owners employ spiritual protection. While the hiring of *brujos* is common practice in the local context, as already mentioned, *curanderos* may also be paid to protect people and centres against *brujería* attacks.

Are All Shamans *Brujos*?

As several of the perspectives of my research participants communicated in this chapter so far convey, a distinction is typically drawn by both local and Western participants in the Iquitos context between *curanderos* (healers) and *brujos* (sorcerers/witches). It is often said that

apprentices are offered a choice by the spirit of ayahuasca between *curanderismo* or *brujería* practice. This choice may be presented to the apprentice through the visionary experience of ceremony, as Don Luco's son Jolker recalled:

“When I was beginning, I had two doors, one here and one here (he gestures two sides), one white and one black. The black is the evil/ wickedness and the white is pure medicine. If you enter in the black, well, you will be bad for the rest of your life, and if you enter in what is white, medicine, your whole life you are going to be open, calm and you feel protected.”

As Jolker's description conveys, darkness is associated with evil and white with medicine and goodness. This distinction is resoundingly accepted and adopted by mestizo practitioners and their apprentices. Jolker suggests that once the choice is made between practicing *medicina* or *brujería*, it is final. It is also typically said that *ayahuasqueros* experience temptations towards evil throughout their apprenticeship and thereafter. Temptations during apprenticeship are often described as 'tests' and the decision to follow the path of 'light' or of 'medicine', presented as the honourable way, requiring more personal strength and commitment.

With a modern and Westernised twist on the theme of temptation, one Western centre owner compared the situation in Iquitos to *Star Wars* involving an on-going battle between good and evil, between *curanderos* and *brujos*:

“It's almost like Star Wars, the force, the dark side of the force. There are jedi that are pure and disciplined and work with love and light, and then you've got Darth Veda who is lost and even says to his son, “There's no way back for me now.” This is a lot of the shamans in this area, I would say 80% are just not nice dudes, even women as well. I was not aware of this until I started this work at the centre. And I've learnt so much in the last four, five years about what's really going on around here - the dark, realising it's fucking rife in Iquitos...”

These perspectives and the presentation of shamanic practice within this framework of 'dark' and 'light' are clearly influenced by Christianity and typically Western perspectives of

duality that draw clear distinctions between good and evil, but do not represent accurately the ambiguities of shamanic practice, as indicated by Fausto (2004).

The distinction between *curanderismo* and *brujería* is dependent on perspective and positionality within mestizo shamanism, as traditional beliefs around the interconnectedness between healing and *brujería*, already discussed, reflect, and as the fact that all shamans in the ayahuasca industry and indeed, the locality, are accused by some people of being *brujos*. Furthermore, as became apparent during research, statements about *brujería* made by mestizo shamans, as with other subjects, must be taken in context or appear contradictory. Luhrmann has argued similarly for magicians in England indicating frequent contradictions in beliefs evidenced by their words and actions (Luhrmann 1991: 148-9).

It is not uncommon to hear some *ayahuasqueros* argue that “*brujería does not exist*” (“*La Brujería no existe.*”). This included Don Luco and his son Jolker. I was initially confused by this statement being aware that they also acknowledged experiences of attack and occasionally labelled certain individuals as *brujos*. One explanation is that they were covering up the ‘darker’ side of shamanism in the presence of Westerners like myself and furthermore, a researcher writing about it; however, they were inconsistent in this tactic if so. On one occasion Don Luco even stated, “*We all have a little brujería, because we need this for defense*”. Another explanation is that, as Don Luco suggested, when we believe in *brujería* and focus on it, we give it energy and therefore power, so his assertion of its non-existence functions as a defence against it.

Clearly, the statement that “*brujería does not exist*” must be taken in context and may function differently in the presence of apprentices compared with less experienced participants, and with locals than in relation to Westerners. Jolker also explained that many people in his community in Jenaro Herrera think all shamans are *brujos*. In this context his

assertion that *brujería* does not exist can be understood as a defence of shamanic practice in general. Shamanic practice has indeed been demonized and associated with witchcraft and sorcery throughout missionary histories in the Amazon (Whitehead & Wright 2004:7) so in this light the dismissal of *brujería* can be understood as a dismissal of colonial and conversion rhetoric and domination. Similarly, following arguments made by Mandelstam Balzer regarding Andean shamanism (1996:314), Fotiou has suggested that some indigenous people might be happy to choose to ignore or forget *brujería* aspects of practice due to the impact of colonial and Christian thought that has demonized and suppressed shamanic traditions on the basis of the existence of these apparently negative aspects of practice for many years (Fotiou 2016:12). I would also argue that Jolker's depiction of 'dark' and 'light' shamanic paths and his own expression of allegiance with the 'light' and *medicina*, as with other mestizo shamans, is to some extent to be understood in this context as a deflection against accusations of sorcery, typically associated by Christian locals with shamanic practice.

My interview with Don Augustin Rivas, a prominent *ayahuasquero* in the Iquitos region as well as internationally, further helped to elucidate these points. I interviewed him in the front room of a local herbalist's shop where he was gathered with family and a few of his Peruvian ceremonial participants. He also argued that: "*brujería does not exist*". His explanation for this assertion rested on the argument that people like to blame their problems on witchcraft and when they believe in it, it feels true. Similarly, he explained that you can also heal with superstition because if you tell someone they will heal when you perform a healing action, they are likely to feel the effect of this if indeed they believe in the possibility. It is argued by some locals as well as Westerners in the Iquitos region that there is a tendency to blame all forms of misfortune and illness on *brujería* too easily. This over emphasis on *brujería* was dismissed by some as superstition (*superstición*).

Furthermore though, Don Augustin Rivas explained that the distinction between *brujos* and *curanderos* came about due to the influence of religion, specifically Christianity, introducing negative connotations to the word *brujo*:

"Religion has done a lot to change people's minds, killing people and leaving terror in the world of the healing arts, with this then they blame you with this word, you are no longer a healer, you are a male witch (brujo) or a female witch (bruja). The word witch was shocking, totally evil, but in real life it's not like that, those brujos and brujas are really good healers, it's always been like this."

According to this perspective 'the healing arts' have been demonised through the influence of religion, whereby all healers were characterised as evil, and the word *brujo* became associated with shamanic practitioners in general. This word has subsequently come to be associated with *brujos* and *brujas* and opposed to *curanderos/as*, as is typical within the Iquitos rhetoric. Yet, Don Augustin Rivas's assertion that *brujos* and *brujas* are also healers is indicative of how mestizo Amazonian shamanism defies Western dualism associated here with Christianity, which distinguishes between 'dark' and 'light', good and evil. Local ambiguity around the word *brujo* and *bruja* was evident within other local insider discourse in my research also, whereby the word *brujo* or *bruja* was sometimes used affectionately by mestizos, indeed as a term of endearment by mestizo *ayahuasqueros* towards apprentices, as I observed in El Espiritista's centre, or between family members as in the previous example (Chapter Four) of Luco's daughter being referred to as "*bruja*".

Amongst and between local practitioners, my research suggests the reality of shamanic practice is clearly more ambiguous than clear distinctions between *brujería* and *curanderismo* portray, and all shamans can indeed be considered *brujos*. In the presence of outsiders, local or Western, shamans assert clear distinctions between *curanderismo* and *brujeria* and 'light' and 'dark', in the presentation and negotiation of their own position in relation to their perception of the other's perspective. Yet while all shamans may be

considered *brujos* to some extent, some shamans and acts of *brujería* are considered particularly harmful. Beliefs in *brujería* that are believed to be merely supersititious (perhaps best translated as witchcraft) are disregarded by many insiders, but the existence of aggressive or mal intentioned shamanic practice aimed at harming others (perhaps more accurately translated as sorcery) is not denied by anyone deeply engaged in ayahuasca shamanism.

Encountering *Brujería*: a Personal Account

As Fotiou and Mesturini Cappelletti have also indicated, those that become immersed in ayahuasca networks in Amazonia soon become aware of sorcery and witchcraft elements of ayahuasca shamanism (Fotiou 2010; Mesturini Cappelletti 2018). Indeed, Fotiou argues that through becoming more embedded in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos, it becomes likely that you will begin to interpret some experiences as *brujería* “attacks” according to ‘local cultural frameworks’ (Fotiou 2010). It could also be said that as one becomes more involved in shamanic practice in the region, one becomes more likely to *experience brujería* attacks because this is part of the reality of shamanic practice. I was initially very sceptical about the existence of *brujería*, due to my own engrained ethnocentric views, but like anyone who stays long enough in ayahuasca circles in the region I’m sure, I too have experienced it.

I began to hear many tales of *brujería* as I became embedded in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos. To my initial surprise, this included the experiences of Western apprentices and experienced participants who frequently tell stories of attack at the hands of rivals in the region, as well as the experiences of locals who commonly assign illnesses to witchcraft causes according to local belief systems (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Beyer 2009; Brabec de Mori 2014). Like Fotiou (Fotiou 2010:196), I was initially somewhat dismissive of *brujería* accusations as gossip related to shamanic rivalries in the region and ayahuasca industry,

aimed at discrediting a certain shaman in favour of another. As addressed previously, the influence of commercialism and the need for Western clients is clearly connected with *brujería* accusations; yet, also, as I did not initially consider, to actual *brujería* occurrences.

The First Encounter

My first personal experience of a *brujería* attack came following a plant *dieta*, after which I stayed with a friend in Iquitos. To my surprise when I arrived at my friend's house, a woman was staying there that I had previously been told by various people was a *bruja*. She asked me about my *dieta* experience that day, which I shared with her, neglecting advice I had received regarding the importance of keeping *dieta* experiences private, due to the possibility of having *dietas* "stolen" by attackers.

I went back to Don Luco's place in Jenaro Herrera and during an ayahuasca ceremony felt very unwell, with a headache and drained of energy, so I lay down for almost the duration of the ceremony, drifting off to sleep before it ended. This was not usual for me. The following day I returned to Iquitos and developed an intense headache. The headache progressed and continued for several days, during which time I felt weaker and weaker developing a sharp pain in my neck and upper back. At one point during a meeting with a friend at a café I had to leave because the pain in my neck had become so crippling that I felt I could no longer sit up at the table and had to go to lie down. During this period of days in Iquitos I tried various pain killers for the headache and neck ache, including Tramadol, for example, a very strong pharmaceutical, but the pain did not go away. I did not tell anyone that in the back of my mind was this woman, the *bruja*... and the possibility that she somehow caused these symptoms. According to my recollection nobody had suggested this to me, and I did not voice these suspicions to anyone during this period in the city. I was cautious and reluctant to

blame *brujería* for this or any other incident, as I felt and still feel that the tendency in Iquitos is often to jump to these conclusions too quickly.

I returned to Don Luco's centre the next day where Don Luco asked me what was troubling me. I explained I had been unwell the previous few days and my symptoms, then finished by hesitantly saying, "*And there's this woman...*" He immediately replied saying, "*This woman is stealing your energy.*" He went on to explain that she is not powerful, but this is how she gains power, by robbing other people's energy. She does not work with "*the light*" gaining wisdom (*sabiduría*) through the practice of *dieta*, he said, but instead, "*she uses other people to gain energy*". Furthermore, he explained that she had been able to attack me because I was a little fearful. He said that if I did not have any fear, she would not be able to do anything to me. This perspective reflects Don Luco's view that "*giving brujería energy, gives it power.*" It is a view shared by some but not all practitioners in the region. Don Luco told me not to worry and that we would "*fix it*" (*arreglarlo*) during the ceremony that night.

That night towards the end of the ayahuasca ceremony he gave me a *ventiada* (individual healing) involving the singing of an *icaro* for protection, the use of the *chakapa* and a *soplada* (cleansing through blowing smoke) with *mapacho*. During this ritual I experienced clear visions of gold - plated armour enclosing around me and fairies dropping magical protective dust over me. The impact was quite incredible. My headache was gone and at the end of the ceremony and the day afterwards I could not believe how much better I felt. My energy had come back, and I felt fully alive and well again.

Following this ceremony Jolker described a vision he had during the ceremony of a woman and another man with a beard who he had perceived as the attackers. The woman matched the one I suspected, and the bearded man might have been the friend I was visiting where she was staying. When I next returned to Iquitos, my friend who I had met in the café told me

that he had also “*done some work*” on me and had seen three sharp objects like knives or darts in the back of my neck, which he had removed.

Whilst I will never be certain of what had transpired, following this ceremony and the work that both Don Luco and my friend did to help me, I felt completely better and my perspective on *brujería* had changed considerably. Strange events and stories I had previously thought impossible or had dismissed as competitive gossip between rivals in the shamanic world, had become possibilities. Luhrmann (1991) has described the process of moving from scepticism to belief in witchcraft within witchcraft circles in contemporary England as essentially participatory and experiential. Luhrmann’s concept of ‘interpretive drift’ involving a gradual change in perception whereby ‘the process of becoming involved in magic makes magic believable’ (Luhrmann 1991:154) can be applied to Westerners’ gradual acceptance of *brujería* through engagement in ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region. There is widespread evidence of appropriation of local understandings of healing and *brujería* by experienced Westerners in the Iquitos region whose perspectives typically transform from sceptics to believers through immersion in ayahuasca shamanism there. As one Western centre owner recalled:

“I was not aware of this until I started this work at the centre. And I’ve learnt so much in the last four, five years about what’s really going on around here – the dark, it’s fucking rife in Iquitos.”

While *brujería* is considered prevalent in the Iquitos region by many Westerners involved in the ayahuasca industry, some Western participants in ayahuasca retreats are also diagnosed as having problems caused by ‘black magic’ from elsewhere, as this Western centre owner described:

“I have a lot of direct experience with this, and through guests coming through realise it’s not just here. We’ve had quite a few guests who have been attacked by black magic,

from Europe or the States, one girl from voodoo, here there is definitely a high concentration, higher than most, but it's going on everywhere.”

Experiences of *brujería* in the local context have clearly impacted the wider perceptions of this Western practitioner, enabling a re-consideration of the possibility of the existence of *brujería* practice in other contexts. This perspective is in line with many other experienced Western participants and practitioners connected with ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region who believe the existence of *brujería* is by no means dependent on ‘cultural belief systems.’

As represented by the female apprentice’s honest reflection on being under a spell presented earlier in this chapter, and as I can say from my own experience, part of the attraction of beliefs in *brujería* for the typically sceptical Western participant is, as Luhrmann also suggests (1991: 148-54), that this alternative way of perceiving the world is more interesting and exciting than a materialist perspective. Yet, in acknowledging this, I am not dismissing the reality of *brujería* experiences. Indeed, the more immersed I became in ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region, the more encounters I had with *brujería*, as in the example of the ceremony with El Maestro recalled earlier in this chapter, and as in another ceremonial experience with El Maestro involving my own hellish experience, the second of two consecutive ceremonies with him, as I will now describe. The ceremonies were conducted in a bare room in a small wooden house owned by El Maestro positioned behind his main house in Jenaro Herrera, with just him and two Western visitors – an experienced elder Canadian male and a young American woman – present.

Ceremony One

During the first ceremony in which the effects of the ayahuasca came on quickly and were strong, I was subsumed within a full sensory experience of what felt like looking inwards into

my heart and seeing darkness, which appeared in abstract visionary forms. While I recognise that my interpretation of this experience is subjective, for the benefit of this discussion and as an offering of autoethnography, I will describe what I felt at the time, that I was confronting darkness within, and more specifically the perception of a lifetime or lifetimes in the past in which I had engaged in many destructive acts of *brujería*, a source of shame and guilt in the present from which the purging that followed brought release. The impact of this ceremonial experience for me was that it made the practice of *brujería* seem closer, and the threat of falling down that path more real, bringing home the possibility that as an individual one can walk either path, or indeed engage in both 'dark' and 'light' elements of practice.

Ceremony Two

I was tired going into this ceremony and in fact had felt hesitant about drinking the day preceding it but decided to proceed and have an average sized portion of ayahuasca brew. Shortly into the ceremony I felt overwhelmed by the effects. I saw a blank 'wall' of yellow in my vision and then an indescribable feeling of terror took hold of me. I was unable to speak for a moment then shouted out in Spanish "*I need help*", something I had never done before. El Maestro stopped to conduct a healing over me with his *chakapa* (shamanic leaf instrument) bringing me back to a stable state. I turned to my ceremonial companion, the Canadian man, and told him "*I couldn't speak*". Then El Maestro's *icaros* began again and within seconds I felt overwhelmed by the effects of the ayahuasca and terror engulfed me once again. This time I threw myself on the floor in front of El Maestro grabbing hold of his ankles in a desperate attempt to stay grounded, keep a grip on 'reality' and elicit his help. Several times while El Maestro sang over me vigorously shaking his *chakapa* I experienced cycles of feeling better only to be overwhelmed by terror once again until at the pinnacle of the experience I was stuck in a kind of hellish timeless loop in which El Maestro and my ceremonial companion appeared as enemies standing over me. I at first thought I had died, and the thought was there that

doubters had been right, that ayahuasca was trouble after all and that I foolishly had died trying to prove otherwise. But having secured a belief in the existence of spirit I thought to myself that surely death was meant to be better than this? Then I believed myself to be trapped for eternity in a kind of hell realm in this hellish loop. Then the feeling or ‘realisation’ that I had gone crazy. I was trapped in psychosis unable to speak and when I tried to form words, I heard an unintelligible language coming from me.

El Maestro and my ceremonial companion then decided to put me in the ‘shower’ at the side of the room (fully clothed). In the throes of psychosis before they were able to pour water over me from the large containers containing water, I cowered in the corner of the shower room scared for them to come near me saying over and over in my demonic language that “*I can’t speak.*” I learnt afterwards from the Canadian participant that I was speaking perfectly clearly in English. After giving an instruction to him, El Maestro went back into the ceremonial space and proceeded to sing and shake his *chakapa* while my companion poured water over me and holding my arms repeated several times: “*You are safe. You are loved and you are strong.*” He then told me to “*tell it to leave*” and with this instruction it occurred to me that I was possessed by a spirit and could tell the spirit to leave, which I did silently. It was then that I ‘came back’ and was reunited with my body and this reality and could hear myself speaking in English again.

Speaking with El Maestro immediately after, sitting on the floor of the ceremonial space, he initially explained he had gone to clear the ceremonial space while my companion helped me by pouring water over me. He told me that I had become afraid and lost touch with reality when I had left my body. He said I needed to learn to leave my body calmly to be able to communicate with spirit allies. This spiritual flight is a key shamanic skill. For me it felt like I had escaped death and the feeling of elation that followed what had been the most incomparably terrifying experience of my life was incredible. However, this did not come with clarity. In the months

and indeed years since this experience occurred, I have been processing and developing my understanding of what happened, its meaning and its significance.

Reflections: Mastering the Spirits

“You have to dominate the spirits or the spirits can dominate you ... you must dominate the spirits and control the bad energies. Everything in the spirit world has a bad part and a good part. It's not just good stuff. Witchcraft comes from yourself if you don't control the bad spirits...

You have to master. You have to control. If you don't you can go crazy.

It's not the ayahuasca that is doing bad things, it's the bad spirits and the evil spirits take you...

...Why do we say Maestro? The Maestro is called a Maestro because he can master the spirits: the Maestro is a spiritual master. Man uses ayahuasca to do what he does, ayahuasca simply does what the man tells him. If it hurts you, it's the man...”

(Don Luco)

“Mastering the spirits” (“*dominando los espiritos*”), as well as referring to establishing relationships with spirits who become helpers (*ayudantes*) to enable healing, also refers to mastering or dominating dark spirits in lower realms and our own personal desires, temptations and fears, which some refer to as our own spirits or demons.

According to shamanic perspectives these desires and temptations can be understood as manifesting as spiritual entities or are the result of being dominated by spirit entities from lower realms. Within the context of shamanic apprenticeship, those who do not learn to master the spirits, as Don Luco explained, are likely to go crazy, or otherwise fall into the practice of *brujería*.

I am still processing what happened during this hellish experience years later and do not profess to have a full understanding of it. But I believe this terrifying episode, or ‘encounter’ during the second ayahuasca ceremony over consecutive nights with El Maestro, gave me first-hand experience of what is meant by “mastering the spirits”, and indeed an occasion(s)

being dominated by them, as well as of being attacked by another who was conceivably unable to master their own and had turned to *brujería*.

The experience was clearly one of amplified fears– the fear of death, not being able to express myself, and perhaps the most difficult of all, going crazy (a fear I have since then heard is stronger for those more attached to the mind than the body) – vital to overcome to achieve mastery. I also reflected on the experience as an amplification of ego (associated also with the yellow solar plexus chakra perhaps related to my vision of block yellow) and mind, occupied by fear, from which my spirit had to break free, or in other terms, cease to be dominated by. Soon afterwards I came to see the spirit that had possessed me as the spirit of fear itself.

There are various possible interpretations on what transpired. The actual experience was for me both an experience of psychosis and an experience of spirit possession, which I argue are alternative interpretations of the same event, but more significantly perhaps, my change in perception altered the experience. I refer to the shift that happened when I began relating to the experience and ‘the spirit’ as though it were separate from me, speaking back to it, understanding therefore that it was something I could expel and overcome, or in other terms, achieve mastery over. Before this shift happened, provoked by my companion, in a state of intense terror, I felt like I was imploding upon myself and that this experience was therefore somehow insurmountable. In my case therefore the shamanic perspective involving spirit inhabitants that are separate from ourselves was far more useful than the Western psychological perspective I embodied for most of the experience.

It was suggested during the months afterwards by El Maestro and another *ayahuasquero* and friend that the experience was an attack upon me by another *ayahuasquero*, an act of *brujería*, something I did not believe at first but came to agree with later, learning around this time from another source that is possible to call the spirit of fear to attack someone. This

notion of calling particular spirits, in this case oppressive ones, is the other side of the same skillset that takes place with shamanic agency. Drawing on Fausto (2000) who highlights the centrality of predation in Amazonian sociality, Fotiou differentiates between Peruvian Amazonian perspectives, and Western perspectives of ayahuasca visionary experiences arguing that ‘Peruvians who have grown up in what is perceived as a predatory social environment tend to attribute their visions or distress and misfortune to sources outside of themselves; sudden illness or misfortune is seen as most likely caused by a sorcerer. However, the more individualistic Westerners tend to look inward and see visions as internal processes, that is, as a property of their own bodies. It is unclear that one view is more valid than the other’ (Fotiou 2010: 201). I agree with her analysis of the differences between local and Western interpretations, and the suggestion that neither view is more valid than the other. Indeed, my research revealed a further possibility evidenced among Western apprentices and practitioners, whereby certain ayahuasca experiences may be interpreted not as either *brujería* or internal psycho-physical processes, but as both at the same time, as exemplified by my own experience, being both an experience of psychosis representing confrontation with my own fears, and an experience of *brujería* attack through possession by a spirit conceivably sent by another shaman.

I came to understand this as a key learning experience, and one that has brought healing and growth, in which the spirit of fear, as well as being terrifying, was a valuable teacher. Within this context the following section addresses novel interpretations of *brujería* developing amongst predominantly Western actors in the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos.

Healing From/Healing Through *Brujería*

From Envy to Trauma

Whereas local understandings of illness, *brujería* and healing mostly centre around envy between individuals, developing understandings of illness, *brujería* and healing amongst Western practitioners and experienced participants centre around trauma inflicted by individuals as experienced through specific events in a person's life, or inflicted by society at large. Examples include psychological or sexual abuse, experiences of war, and racial inequality and abuse.

I interviewed a European female psychologist and *ayahuasquera* in the garden of the local café “*The Amazon Bistro*” on the boulevard, which serves as a hub for the ex-pat community. She combines psychotherapeutic work with shamanic healing through a process that begins and ends in Europe with preparatory and integrative psychotherapy sessions and involves shamanic healing work with ayahuasca and other plant medicines at her centre in the Iquitos region. She emphasised the benefits of mixing modalities for Western participants arguing that shamanic work “*speeds up the process*” due to its visionary content but Westerners also “*need to talk*”. She explained the benefits of working with ayahuasca and related plant medicines in comparison to only using psychiatry or psychotherapy as being able to go “*beyond mental*”, and access traumas “*in your body, in your emotions, in your cells*”. This emphasis on the body and emotion as opposed to the mental landscape is typical of how healing is understood and described by Western practitioners within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos and relates to ayahuasca's feminization

When I asked her about *brujería* the psychologist/ shaman went further to explain in shamanic terms how ayahuasca and other plant medicines can be utilized to treat mental health problems, responding:

“I work of course, with people who are polluted with bad spirits, and possessions, I work with this ...My way of thinking is when there are traumas there is a wound in your mind, your mind has been hurt, it's damaged, and in this place often there are bad energies, bad spirits entering, and these spirits let's say, or energies, it doesn't matter, they will put very negative things in the mind of the person, or they block the life of the person, or

they make the person feel bad or sad or depressed, and this spiritual work you cannot do in psychotherapy, it's a very important point, and when you take the plants these bad spirits, these bad energies they appear, so you can work with it, in the ceremonies you see it. Ayahuasca and the plants they put a lot of light on the person so you can go in places where there is darkness and in the darkness there are these things..."

Her response reflects the use of the concept of *brujería* to apply to understandings of trauma, whereby healing of trauma is often conceptualized as the removal of “*negative energy*” or “*dark spirits*” that inhabit the individual due to traumas suffered during their lifetime, sometimes referred to by Western practitioners as *brujería*. This is one way in which Western practitioners engage with *brujería* and exhibit perspectives similar to local peoples who recognise an inherent link between healing and *brujería*.

This perspective is furthermore representative of the adoption of local Amazonian, or indeed, shamanic understandings of mental health shared by many experienced practitioners I interviewed in the field, whereby mental illness is considered in terms of spirit possession. For instance, addiction was defined by El Maestro as being dominated by the spirit of the substance one is addicted to. He explained in reference to the potential misuse of cannabis in contrast to its potential medicinal uses: “*Addiction is when you can't manage the spirit and the spirit dominates you.*” Within the Iquitos context these perspectives of mental illness are rarely shared with transient Western participants in retreats but are resoundingly accepted by long-term Western shamanic practitioners. The work of the *curandero*, as described by the psychologist shaman is to expel these negative spirits (usually through an action referred to as *chupa*, referring to the sucking and blowing action enacted by the *curandero*).

Within this formulation, *brujería* is associated with mental health problems such as depression or addiction caused by specific traumas inflicted by a specific person or people, ancestral trauma related usually to the female or male line in a person's family involving repetitions of harmful behaviour and beliefs connected with societal pressures and norms, or

may be applied to non-personal social trauma associated with living in a modern industrialised society under capitalism removed from natural environments.

A Site of Resistance

As addressed in Chapter Three, many Westerners engaged in ayahuasca shamanism consider ayahuasca more effective than pharmaceuticals or psychotherapy for healing mental health problems. For instance, the female apprentice we met earlier in this chapter argued that “*for trauma and depression Western medicine doesn’t compare.*” Considering that healing from trauma and mental health problems is often conceptualised as healing from *brujería*, I propose a comparison between local and touristic contexts in which *brujería* emerges as a site of resistance in both against the dominant culture associated with ‘the Whites’. Sorcery has been depicted as a site of resistance against colonialism and the power of the White man (Taussig 1987; Beyer 2009:376). This concept was evident also in Don Luco’s origin tale in which mestizos learnt *brujería* to defend themselves against the colonialists. In the local context my ethnography revealed how the healing of *brujería* is defined positively by local *ayahuasqueros* in opposition to the power of pharmaceuticals and Western medicine to heal, with apparent deaths attributed to the fact that certain ailments were treated by *médicos* rather than by shamanic means. Similarly, amongst Western practitioners in the Iquitos context the healing of mental health problems deemed largely as influenced by living in an industrialised, capitalist and patriarchal society, is also considered most effective through shamanic means involving the removal of *brujería*. Thus, beliefs in *brujería* and the appropriation of the concept of *brujería* amongst Western practitioners functions also as a site of resistance against the dominant (Western Capitalist/Patriarchal) culture.

Beyond Duality

Another framework under which healing ‘work’ is conceptualised by experienced Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism is as Jungian ‘shadow work’ entailing confrontation with the unconscious widely perceived of as feminine. This encompasses uncovering unconscious aspects of the self that have been hidden following feelings of rejection in childhood by guardians or wider society because they are considered undesirable traits that are out of line with social norms. If these aspects, sometimes conceptualised as spiritual entities, remain hidden and unintegrated within the individual they reveal themselves through negative fear - based behaviour. This behaviour and the energies or spiritual entities associated with it may be perceived as and experienced as ‘dark’. Yet rather than seeking to expel ‘dark’ energies, with ‘shadow work’ the dark aspects of the soul must be re-integrated for harmony within the individual to be restored.

During the writing up of this dissertation involving re-engagement with my own hellish experience described in this chapter, I was encouraged by a healer outside of this context to perceive this experience as representative of a part of myself being separated from me, which needed to be welcomed back in, and brought back “into the light”, which was very helpful. This approach and interpretation represents non-dual cosmivision in which the ‘dark’ and ‘light’ aspects of oneself are considered part of one integrated whole.

Western apprentices as well as participants in ayahuasca shamanism are influenced by Eastern spirituality and philosophies of non-dualism, as perceptions of God and wider influences discussed in the previous chapter portray. These perspectives have inevitably impacted upon their perceptions of “*the dark side*” creating novel interpretations of *brujería*. In one example an American resident in Iquitos who had experienced many ayahuasca ceremonies and also had a wide interest in spiritual traditions came to interpret the malevolent spirits and benevolent spirits he encountered through visions as “*all on the same*

side” suggesting that when we have frightening visions of dark spirits that really, “*they are just scaring us back towards the light*”.

It has even become quite common for experienced Western participants and practitioners to speak in positive terms about their experiences of *brujería* attacks, and for their interpretations to be justified by references to quasi-Eastern philosophy, emphasising the inherent interconnectedness of everything and everything’s connectedness to one “*source*” (or “*oneness*”). For instance, an American *ayahuasquero* who compared the role of a shamanic healer to that of a priest in his interview, “*but more like a Buddhist one who tells you it’s all you*” and referred to *brujería* as “*a gift*” and “*a teaching tool*” that is essential for learning to be a healer enabling necessary learning about our own weaknesses and overcoming them. He explained:

“I love the African proverb that says, “When there are no enemies within, the enemies outside can’t hurt you” and the fortune cookie that says, “The problem is you.” If you’re not getting hit by it, great there’s no problem, but if you think you can get hit by it and just ignore it, hmm good luck with that! ... I look at it as just a disruptive energy pattern, so what they’re throwing at you is this, just energy coming in and then, it’s non-discriminatory and so where is it going to hit? It’s ‘gonna hit you where you’re weak. You shore that up, the next time that comes in, it doesn’t have anything to hang on to. So, when you’re getting hit, I use it as “what is this trying to teach me?” Then I’m not worried about it and I accept that energy that comes in. It isn’t bad energy. Again, in the cosmic sense, this is actually all love. Because I know that as soon as we figure this out, as soon as I get past this, I’m going to be stronger than I was before and I’m gonna’ know something that I didn’t before, so what am I afraid of?”

His explanation suggests that the external reality is a reflection of the internal reality. Thus, according to this formulation *brujería* attacks actually occur in relation to our own internal processes, as reflections of ‘weaknesses’, and fears. This represents a development from Fotiou’s analysis of Westerners’ tendency to psychologize visions perceiving darker visions as reflections of ‘internal processes’ in comparison to the way in which Peruvian Amazonians tend to perceive dark visions as representative of *brujería* attacks from an external source (Fotiau 2010). Indeed, my research indicates that for some experienced Western

participants/practitioners ‘dark’ visionary and ceremonial experiences may be considered both, whereby what is happening internally actually manifests externally as a *brujería* attack. My own experience of psychosis/spirit possession/attack during ceremony is a case in point. Such an ‘attack’ can enable confrontation with one’s deepest fears or other ‘weaknesses’ and if perceived and interpreted in such a way, through its processing becomes a healing experience.

The perspective that everything is essentially on our side and there to teach and guide us is shared by many experienced Western actors in the Iquitos ayahuasca community. This belief in the unity of all things or “oneness” and essentially good nature of everything has become typical of contemporary perspectives within Western ayahuasca circles (Gearin & Saez 2021) as it is within the wider modern spiritual movement (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). These perspectives may seem contradictory to those expressed by local mestizo practitioners in my research working within a Christian framework but then again, are not in any great contradiction with the view that “*God created everything, the good and also the bad*”, as voiced by El Maestro in the previous chapter. This theme is present also in Taussig’s study in the case of Florencio being ill: while others emphasized his affliction was caused by another through dreadful *brujería*, his ability to survive was associated with his attitude being focused on it being meant for him as a gift from God, as he is quoted saying: “*God gave illness to the world. God himself created mankind and by the same action gave illness – to everyone*” (1987:450-51).

Keeping it Hidden

Whereas in other contexts sorcery accusations often lead to aggressive confrontations that might result in physical murder, in mestizo society confrontation is avoided whilst sorcery accusations and attacks rage in relative secrecy behind a mirage of cordial relations (Buchillet

2004:117; Beyer 2009: 143). This is also the case within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos.

While behind closed doors and during ceremonies shamans and apprentices engage in shamanic battle and gossip about their rivals with trusted companions, it is quite usual for them to exchange pleasantries with said rivals as they pass each other on the street. However, in contrast to local Amazonian contexts in which *brujería* is generally considered an ever-present reality and threat, while experienced as such by many Western practitioners in Iquitos, it is largely hidden from transient Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism and other outsiders.

As my discussion in this chapter has addressed, the existence of *brujería* has been widely dismissed by outsiders and eclipsed by literary romanticism. As Fotiou has commented, based on her experience of the situation in Iquitos, ‘a result of this romanticization of shamanism is that even when there is evidence of malevolent shamans there is a tendency to dismiss them as “pseudo shamans” (Fotiou 2016:12). I have also observed this tendency amongst Westerners in the Iquitos context. Furthermore though, I argue, *brujería* has been purposefully hidden from Western participants by the commercial industry for many years. Indeed, while insiders in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos grapple with *brujería* attacks on an almost daily basis and several Westerners associated with large centres in the region have left or chosen to live elsewhere due to *brujería* attacks, ayahuasca shamanism continues to be promoted by the industry as a purely healing practice.

People working in the ayahuasca tourism industry are usually reluctant to talk at length about *brujería*, their own experiences of it, and its use in general across the region. This is partly due to fear of experiencing further attacks, and the belief that talking about it might attract *brujería* attacks, sometimes referred to as “*giving it too much energy*”, but perhaps more often than not, it is due to the desire to keep this aspect of shamanic practice in the region

hidden from people deemed as outsiders, who may be potential customers or commentators in the public realm.

Indeed, some experienced practitioners and participants in the ayahuasca industry are actively engaged in covering up its existence. A striking example of this attitude in action during my research was when a fellow anthropologist, embedded personally in local ayahuasca community networks in the Iquitos region and nearby, was criticised by the manager of a prominent ayahuasca centre in Iquitos during the international World Ayahuasca Conference 2019 for drawing attention to *brujería* aspects of ayahuasca shamanism in a talk they gave there. This example illustrates the level of influence some prominent figures in the ayahuasca industry feel they are entitled to over public perceptions of ayahuasca and is also demonstrative of the widespread belief among many people engaged in the industry that protecting ayahuasca's reputation is more important than telling the truth about its varied uses including the persistence of *brujería* in this context. This perspective is justified by some as being in the interests of transient participants who may be 'put off' from engaging in ayahuasca healing, and perhaps frightened unnecessarily by *brujería* being a reality in ayahuasca contexts.

Indeed, *brujería* is often dismissed by outsiders as being unreal or associated with internal 'cultural belief systems', which, in effect, diminishes its relevance and reality. Yet, Westerners living and working within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos not only acknowledge the existence of *brujería* but also its prevalence in the region and beyond. There is disagreement amongst insiders over whether it would be beneficial or not to speak more openly about *brujería*. One Western centre owner suggested:

"we should be telling people, because it's irresponsible not to be telling people, but then I don't know if it would actually make any difference. If you've never been attacked by black magic or a brujo or a spirit then it doesn't exist..."

There is also the argument communicated at various points in this discussion by Don Luco, for example, and implied by Florencio in Taussig (1987: 450-51) that giving *brujería* energy gives it power. This seems most applicable to individual's experiences of it. On the other hand, although perhaps not in conflict with this idea, some suggest that *brujería* retains its power through its very secrecy, as the Western centre owner also suggested:

“If it's kept secret the power stays. If it's common knowledge and everybody knows then it loses its power immediately.”

This interpretation resonates with 'shadow work' involving confrontation with one's own hidden 'dark side', which can then conceivably be brought in to 'the light.'

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that spiritual warfare rages behind the backdrop of a spiritual healing industry in Iquitos, emphasizing that *brujería* is an integral part of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism within which all shamans are to some extent engaged. Social indicators of *brujería* accusations and occurrences such as the presence of envy and jealousy, social and economic inequality, and the presence of outsiders, are consistent throughout history into the present through their different manifestations. The growth of the ayahuasca industry involving professionalised shamanic practice, commercial interests, and cross-cultural encounters and conflicts, has created the conditions necessary for a proliferation of *brujería* attacks and accusations in the Iquitos region in recent years. As well as highlighting the prevalence of *brujería* in the commercial industry, I have argued in line with many insiders, that the commercialisation of ayahuasca seems to have actually exacerbated the potential for *brujería*, leading to an increase in occurrences.

Throughout my ethnography *brujería* emerges as a site of resistance in touristic as in local contexts against the dominant culture. I have described how traditional beliefs connecting the

causes of illness with *brujería* are being disseminated and appropriated by some of the international population participating in shamanic practice in the region. In this way the continued use of ayahuasca within the tourism industry can be seen to be preserving traditional understandings of *brujería* and the causes of illness. Yet, developments of understandings of *brujería* are also evident in the perspectives of experienced Western actors in the Iquitos context focused on healing trauma and influenced by non-dualistic cosmovision, and which emphasize the connection between external and internal worlds.

I propose also that *brujería* occurrences can also be provoked by competition over Western women between male shamans, highlighting the centrality of male shamanic agency in the orchestration of *brujería* accusations and healings, related to battles for power, clients and apprentices, and women. Furthermore, I suggest that covering up ‘the dark side’ of ayahuasca shamanism, as actors within the commercial industry have, may actually have contributed to an increase in *brujería* cases. Similar observations could be made of occurrences of sexual abuse of female participants within ayahuasca contexts, the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter Eight: Sexual Abuse within the Ayahuasca Industry

Alongside being an agent of healing and *brujería*, ayahuasca is also an agent of romantic and sexual seduction, and attack. Ayahuasca is a prominent ally in the Amazonian practice of “love magic” (“*la ciencia de amor*”) whereby romantic and sexual partners are conjoined through the use of spells, and a tool for healing relationship and sexual trauma for many Western participants in shamanic retreats. However, it is also a vehicle through which *ayahuasqueros* and ceremonial leaders sexually abuse participants in ceremonies and related contexts. Within the climate of the #MeToo movement in recent years it has become common knowledge that sexual abuse of predominantly female participants in ayahuasca shamanism is a widespread phenomenon. As in other situations sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts is essentially an abuse of power whereby perpetrator shaman and ceremonial leaders take advantage of the uneven power dynamics that usually exist between them and ceremonial participants in ayahuasca shamanism (Peluso 2014, Chacrana 2019; Sinclair & Labate 2019).

While figures are hard to come by, sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism has seemingly increased within the context of the global ‘ayahuasca industry’ (Peluso 2014, Chacrana 2019; Sinclair & Labate 2019; Peluso, Sinclair, Labate & Cavnar 2020). In this chapter I will address reasons for this through evidence from my fieldwork. I build on work that argues that non-local participants in ayahuasca shamanism are particularly vulnerable to sexual attack due to their unfamiliarity with local culture and practices in Amazonian settings and argue that the lack of protection and support that has been available to them in these settings exacerbates these risks. Furthermore, I build on work that recognises a wide range of patriarchal structures or tendencies and argue that the commercial organisation of the ayahuasca industry has intensified the potential for sexual abuse to take place and contributed to its suppression in Iquitos touristic contexts. My discussion scrutinizes local beliefs and practices regarding ayahuasca that are related to sexuality and

romantic love, particularly in relation to Westerners' perceptions of ayahuasca and shamanism. I also examine ideas about medical and ethical codes of conduct, addressing how these different beliefs and practices interact, conflict, overlap and develop within touristic ayahuasca settings.

Following my fieldwork in Iquitos I became involved in public action work to combat sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts and led an initiative with the *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Medicines* to raise awareness about the problem of sexual abuse across the 'ayahuasca community'. Through a collaborative effort with colleagues, researchers and experienced participants in ayahuasca shamanism we produced a set of guidelines aimed at raising awareness about the problem of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings and providing guidance to help keep participants safe (Chacruna 2019). I distributed the guidelines on the ground in Iquitos as well as more widely (Sinclair 2019).

My discussion in the last section of this chapter will focus on this work, addressing the debates around gender and cross-cultural dynamics, responsibility and consent that this project raised, highlighting difficulties faced with communicating across cultural boundaries on these issues and implementing change on the ground. My discussion throughout this chapter highlights the 'grey areas' and blurred boundaries that exist in touristic ayahuasca settings around issues of sexual seduction and abuse being heightened by the presence of multiple and sometimes contradictory moralities related to different cultural perspectives and practices and the diversity within such perspectives and practices.

The problem of sexual abuse in ayahuasca communities is widespread covering diverse global settings (Peluso 2014; Méndez 2015; Fernández 2018; Sánchez Sarmiento 2018; Benedito & Böschmeier 2019; Brown 2020). Indeed, my own research, including fieldwork in the Iquitos region and engagement with victims and survivors of sexual abuse across

global settings through my involvement in the *Chacruna*' sexual abuse awareness initiative (Chacruna 2019), suggests that most women with long-term experience in ayahuasca communities have experienced some form of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings or know another woman who has. While steps are being taken to address the issue of sexual abuse within the ayahuasca community, changes are gradual and abuse of power in all its forms remains prominent across ayahuasca shamanism. I begin this discussion by outlining the kinds of sexual abuse that typically take place in ayahuasca contexts.

Sexual Abuse in Ayahuasca Contexts

Sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts ranges from unwanted sexual advances, to molestation, to violent acts of sexual intercourse through brute force. Research in diverse, global settings has revealed typical scenarios in which sexual abuse takes place across these settings within the context of ayahuasca based practices (Chacruna 2019). Scenarios of abuse are sometimes orchestrated by predator shaman who serially abuse women in ayahuasca ceremonies and related contexts.

Unwanted invasive touching of intimate parts during supposed 'healing' sessions by *ayahuasqueros* and apprentices, or other ceremonial facilitators is seemingly the most prevalent form of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings. These transgressions often occur when participants are heavily under the effects of ayahuasca, typically towards the end of ceremonies when it is usual for individual healings to take place and other participants may be resting or asleep. Women report feeling confused and in shock in the event of abuse, since "*it happens before you know what is happening*", as one of my interviewees described it. Acts of molestation may also occur during individual 'healing' sessions outside of group ceremonial contexts when participants are usually alone with the *ayahuasquero*. These may be presented as necessary complementary healings involving shamanic techniques, massage

or different forms of energy healing; may take place during plant *dietas* or rituals with other psychedelic plants; or may involve the use of other psychoactive substances such as DMT or other synthetic chemicals, as is also quite common within the Iquitos milieu.

Coercion of women into sexual acts by shamans and ceremonial facilitators under the guise of healing is another typical scenario for sexual abuse within ayahuasca shamanism. In these instances, women are often told by the shaman they need to have sex with them in order for healing to be accomplished effectively. These manipulation techniques are also typically used within ‘love magic’ contracts, whereby (usually Amazonian) women are cajoled into having sex with the shaman conducting a love spell on their behalf in the hope of winning their true love interest, and also apprenticeship style relations whereby (usually Western) women are told by their ‘*maestro*’ that sex with them is the most effective way for shamanic knowledge to be transferred. Some women who escape these relationships have described the use of manipulation techniques by perpetrators over time for the purpose of sexual gratification. In one such account, which I edited for publication (Rebekah in *chacrana.net*, April 2019), a woman explained how ayahuasca became a ‘conduit’ for her abuser’s sexual fulfilment:

“The shaman would often give me special attention, frequently showering me with compliments about my power, “specialness,” and visions; behaviour that I have now come to realize, through the emergence of other stories, is commonly used by perpetrators of abuse... He often claimed to “need” me. Initially, he said this in a ceremonial setting, for which I was glad... Ayahuasca became a conduit for his other agenda. Before long his “need” for me in ceremony translated into sexual necessity.”

Some of these encounters are isolated incidents but more typically, they take place over an extended period, usually where women have been coaxed into apprenticeship and business relations with supposed healers.

Within the Iquitos context acts of sexual abuse are quite often considered to be acts of *brujería* (witchcraft/sorcery) involving the use of shamanic techniques for the purpose of manipulation and sexual attack. While it is usual for people to experience a ‘freeze response’

in the event of sexual abuse whereby they feel unable to move and/or defend themselves against their attacker (Sanderson 2013), within the context of ayahuasca-related sexual abuse, it is also considered possible for shamans to manipulate this response from their victims through the use of shamanic powers. Indeed, the inability to move when sexual abuse is taking place was a common theme within reports of sexual abuse within my research that was often associated with shamanic agency. While these might be considered alternative interpretations of the same event, contrary to this argument is the claim that was present in my research that perpetrator shamans may also “paralyse” other ceremonial participants whilst they sexually abuse an individual. From this vantage point perpetrator shamans emerge as aggressor predators whereas if considered as a ‘freeze response’, some perpetrators might argue they interpreted a lack of resistance as consent. This could be deemed as understandable within the local cultural context in which women are usually more submissive and the issue of consent has not received the attention it has in Western countries and is not usually expected to be vocal, and in which codes of conduct around shaman-patient relations are not clearly defined.

Another possibility within the context of ayahuasca shamanism is spiritual rape, a phenomenon also reported by Evengia Fotiou (Fotiou 2010:214-5) whereby *ayahuasqueros* call the spirits of participants who are *mareados* (drunk) to them and abuse them spiritually. This kind of abuse was observed many times by *mestizo ayahuasquera* La Doctora in ayahuasca ceremonies. While the abused do not feel anything, the attacker enjoys it (“*la persona no siente pero ellos le disfruta*”), she said. These spiritual attacks are usually enacted when participants are almost unconscious, often having been given too much ayahuasca intentionally by the perpetrator, and can occur unbeknownst to the abused. Although the abused do not usually feel anything in the event of this kind of abuse, it affects them

negatively being “*something dirty*”, which, according to La Doctora, has the effect of making them become “*closed and unable to find love or work*”.

The local female *ayahuasqueras* I interviewed all raised the issue of sexual harassment and abuse within their profession and have suggested that this problem is one reason why there are fewer female practitioners than male. For many women, experiences of abuse or the threat of abuse acts as a deterrent against participating in the male dominated practice of ayahuasca shamanism. Indeed, sexual abuse of female apprentices may be seen as the result of trying to succeed in a male dominated domain. A Shipibo *Maestra* explained in an interview that in her home community in the region of Pucallpa female *curanderas* work together and treat female patients because:

“between women, there is more trust in the work, but men and women very little...some, no, almost do not give confidence to men, but women like me, with you and me, yes or no? speaking, as between women.”

She clarified that this was partly because often “*men want sexual things.*”. Indeed, male dominated ayahuasca retreat settings which foreign women often attend alone without female relatives or friends to accompany them, are unusual according to local norms (Peluso 2014).

La Doctora was motivated to become an *ayahuasquera* and *espiritista* largely to help women:

“because for that I am sent, for healing, salvation, and justice for women who are mistreated, who are raped, who are marginalized, who are abused, for all that kind of thing I am sent.”

She experienced sexual abuse at the hands of a group of male *ayahuasqueros* with whom she previously apprenticed and worked. In an interview she recalled with horror how she witnessed this group of “*maestros*” serially sexual abusing their female patients in ayahuasca ceremonies. One night they had also attempted to rape her,

positioning her in the centre of the room and attempting to paralyse her first through shamanic techniques. Having received warnings about their mal - intentions through her spirit guides, she said, she was able to protect herself against sexual abuse in this instance. Following her attempted rape, she terminated her work with this group of *ayahuasqueros* and worked predominantly alone in the treatment of women before starting work in a touristic centre. This meant working alongside male *ayahuasqueros* once again, who she discovered were also sexually abusive towards their patients: “*The maestros there do the same*”. The growth of tourism she argues, has attracted “*many false shamans who are simply abusers*”. La Doctora emphasised that sexual abuse of patients and ceremonial participants happens in local contexts as well as touristic contexts but that it is mostly Western women who are affected, “*leaving them emotionally stranded in a foreign country, with no clear legal recourse*”.

From Local to Touristic Contexts: the growth of the sexual abuse problem

As La Doctora attests, sexual abuse of women in ayahuasca communities is a problem in local as well as Westernized contexts. However, the growth of the global ayahuasca industry with Iquitos as its hub has created conditions in which sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism has been able to grow. In this section I will explore why.

When I first arrived in Iquitos in 2014 and began partaking in ayahuasca ceremonies I was completely unaware of the potential dangers of sexual abuse in such settings. Yet within the first couple of months of being there I had experienced sexual advances from two ‘healers’ (one local *ayahuasquero*, one American energy healer) during healing practices. I blamed my own naivety for these occurrences at the time and assumed they were rare and isolated incidences. However, it gradually became apparent that sexual

abuse of women partaking in ayahuasca shamanism in the vicinity, and beyond, was quite commonplace.

I was first told that shaman/participant sexual abuse was a problem by a middle- aged Canadian woman who I met at the centre where I initially volunteered (featured in the opening *vignette* of this dissertation). She had long-term experience drinking ayahuasca with several different *ayahuasqueros* across different regions of Peru and had recently left a centre where she had been staying for some time because the *ayahuasquero* there had told her that she must have sex with him if she wanted to progress. This was only the most recent disappointment she had experienced with a potential healer and teacher, having been on the receiving end of inappropriate sexual advances from others before him.

With my eyes now more open, I began to take note of the wider extent to which sexual abuse was a problem and its increasing occurrence in Iquitos. During the following years while the #MeToo movement took hold of global consciousness, I continued to take note of the numerous encounters with sexual abuse my research participants experienced. The following are a few examples that represent the various forms and scenarios in which sexual abuse typically occurs in this setting. They also raise key issues in touristic ayahuasca contexts around cross-cultural understandings of consent and codes of conduct for shaman/facilitator – patient/participant relations, that I will address in the following discussion.

Example 1:

A European woman had travelled to Peru for the purpose of engaging in ayahuasca healing in its native environment for the first time, having partaken in several ayahuasca ceremonies in her home country beforehand. She located ceremonies in a centre through people she met in Iquitos and travelled there with a female companion. The centre and *ayahuasquero* working there were apparently well known in the region. In an interview a year later she recalled feeling “*uncomfortable from the start*” in this setting but, she explained, “*I ignored my instincts because I had come here for this experience and we were now quite far from the city and well, I didn’t know what I was doing*”. She and her female companion were both sexually abused during the ceremony that evening, as she described:

“towards the end of the ceremony the shaman came over to “do our healings” (gestures sarcastically) ... he went over to the other girl first and I felt something was off the way he was touching her ... then he came to me and I froze. As he moved his hands gradually over my body it didn’t feel right but I wasn’t sure until he reached my... (gestures to her genital area)... and didn’t stop. I felt sick and of course you look back and think, ‘how did I let him do that’? but in the moment you know it happens before you know what is happening”.

The women left the next morning and went to the police station in Iquitos immediately to file a complaint against the perpetrator. “*This was not a good idea*”, the woman explained, “*actually it made it worse*” as police officers laughed at the women and suggested that it was their fault for going to the centre alone and for trusting their attacker.

Example 2:

A young English woman was conducting her first plant *dieta* in a retreat centre near to Iquitos. During the *dieta* when there were no other guests present and the shaman’s apprentice was also away from the centre, the shaman visited her to conduct a “healing.” He

told her she needed to be naked for this healing, and so she undressed. *“I didn’t really think anything of it at that point”* she recalled. The shaman proceeded to manoeuvre his hands over her body gesturing occasionally to *“swipe away energy”*. *“It became more and more uncomfortable”* until finally he was touching her intimate parts and then *“unbuttoned his pants and went to pull out his penis”*. It was then that the woman spoke up and stopped him from going any further. In hindsight, she said, *“it seems so stupid now that I let him get that far.”*

Example 3:

An American man’s female friend had been apprenticing with *“el brujo”* as he later referred to the *ayahuasquero*, for a short time - for which she had paid him a large amount of money (apparently over thirty thousand dollars). One night he accompanied her to a ceremony in *“el brujo’s”* house along with several other people. Towards the end of the ceremony, the man said, *“I realised I could not move”*. *“El brujo”* he explained, had *“paralysed”* him and the other ceremonial participants. *“I saw him go for my friend and knew something terrible was going to happen, but I couldn’t do anything about it”*, he recalled. *“El Brujo”* took her to the toilets where he raped her, as she told her friend afterwards. Unable to defend herself, she had been under the influence of similar forces.

Example 4:

A European woman who had an extended stay in Iquitos over several months recalled how she was *“groomed”* by an *ayahuasquero* who made a series of dubious claims and suggestions to coax her into having sex with him. *“He attempted to normalise sex between us”* by first telling her about a previous relationship he had with a female apprentice and explaining that *“his wife didn’t mind what he did with other women”*. *“He began to lie with me at the end of ceremonies and gradually got closer and more*

intimate with me, doing healing work on my body at first until we started having sex sometimes". It was months later that she looked back and "*realised I had been taken advantage of*".

Example 5 (as also addressed in the previous chapter):

A female American apprentice who was suffering from unrequited love and heartache was told by her then *maestro* that he could teach her "*love magic*." When I spoke with her, the apprentice explained that she had recently been released from a "*spell*" he had put her under, the effects of which she described: "*my desire to be with him was overwhelming, it was like an obsession, you can't stop thinking about them and you feel kind of crazy*". Although she was released from the "*spell*" before any sexual abuse took place, under its effects, she became defensive of him when suspected cases of sexual abuse involving local patients became apparent recalling, "*I couldn't see that anything would go wrong even when he was molesting the girls, I thought well that's just expected here*." She also revealed later that he had suggested to her at one point that having sex with him was "*the most direct way to learn*".

Example 6:

An American ayahuasca tourist in her early twenties who had suffered sexual trauma in the past was participating in ayahuasca ceremonies staying with an *ayahuasquero* and his family in a local town downstream from Iquitos. The woman held this man in very high esteem and would praise him frequently in company and elicit his attention. One evening there was a *fiesta* in the town during which she and the *ayahuasquero* both drank quite large amounts of alcohol. According to onlookers he was very drunk and in front of a dance floor full of people pulled the young woman out of the crowd and took her away with him. She later returned to

the family home covered in blood and crying, as women in the household witnessed, trying to console her. It transpired that they had had sex in a field where he had taken her nearby, what she later referred to as a “*drunken fumble*”. The local women who had seen her following the event expressed concern for her welfare and suggested the shaman was at fault. However, they seemed reluctant to say very much about the incident, perhaps due to this *ayahuasquero*’s status in the community and the prevalence of gossip (*chisme*) there. Male members of the local population, including two other *ayahuasqueros*, took a different view. They joked about the incident saying she had had sex with another man in the town also. A couple of men expressed disapproval with the *ayahuasquero* involved but one clarified this by saying, “*if you are going to do something with a girl, you don’t do it where everybody can see*”.

Example 7:

An experienced British male ayahuasca drinker brought an incident to the attention of the Western male organiser of a retreat in which he was working as a facilitator near Iquitos. The local “*curandero*”, he explained, had singled out a female participant for “*special attention*” and begun taking her to his lodgings during the retreat:

“Worried for her safety on account of her history of vulnerability combined with my growing suspicions about the curandero, I approached the retreat organiser and centre owner in order to warn him that I suspected foul play and that some intervention might be required in order to bring all concerned back on track. He was not interested in my concerns and reassured me that he trusted the curandero to do whatever was needed to help the female participant in question to recover from her abuse trauma. I reminded him of professional distancing, conflict of interests, the absolute prohibition of sex during retreats and especially between doctor and patient, that there is a very clear line not to be crossed, and finally that it would be disastrous for his own reputation if abuse was permitted on his watch. He was more interested in brushing it off, not intervening and having a go at me for over-reacting. He even told me that if the curandero believed it would be helpful for the female retreat participant to have sex with him, then he trusted him to know what was necessary and “she probably needs a good shag to brush away the cobwebs, anyway.””

The facilitator left the retreat before it ended feeling “*pushed out*” and disillusioned.

Conflicting Interpretations of Ayahuasca Culture

Between Peruvian *ayahuasqueros* and Western clientele, misinformed cultural stereotypes in touristic settings have greatly contributed to occurrences of sexual abuse. A key problem is the romanticisation of ayahuasca shamanism that is typical of ayahuasca’s Western audience (Fotiou 2010; Labate & Cavnar 2014; Gearin 2016; Mesturini Cappo 2018) that places *ayahuasqueros* on a pedestal. Within mestizo society *ayahuasqueros* are not expected to be morally superior, as the example of the drunk *ayahuasquero* having sex with his Western admirer in example 6 reflects. In fact, being drunk is a common occurrence among local *ayahuasqueros*. Many Western participants have a tendency to assume that Amazonian shamans are spiritual monks or gurus and not normal men. Abstinence rules associated with the ‘ayahuasca diet’ followed by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism (Gearin & Labate 2018) are significant in influencing such perceptions, being included in guidance given to Western participants in organised ceremonies and retreats. Within the mind-set of ayahuasca retreat and ceremonial participants, abstinence seems often to be confused with asceticism.

In this light, Westerners’ misperceptions of *ayahuasqueros* go beyond naïve romanticism but are rather based on the misinterpretation of the little information they have regarding local shamanic practice. For them, these sexual abstinence practices are akin to various types of eastern spirituality influences which predate the popularity of Amazonian shamanism within the popular Western spiritual movement (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). It is no surprise that when the importance of sexual abstinence for engaging in ayahuasca shamanism has been emphasised to Western participants, that

they are shocked and unprepared for the possibility of sexual abuse occurring in such a healing framework.

Having entered ceremonial environments largely ill-informed and ignorant about the potential danger for possible sexual abuse, Western women are furthermore at risk because of how they may be perceived by local people in Amazonian settings. Indeed, the owner of the first ayahuasca centre I visited warned me that Western women are often perceived by Amazonian men as being “*loose*” and sexually available, due partly, he suggested, to cinematic and online references, including presumably, pornography. Transient participants in ayahuasca shamanism are not usually made aware of local perceptions of themselves as Westerners. Yet, retreat settings and formats sometimes involve them engaging in behaviours that might feed these stereotypes. For instance, it is quite common for Western retreat participants in ayahuasca retreats in the Iquitos region to bathe naked or semi-naked in local rivers and to occasionally also participate in group flower or mud baths that may be included as part of ‘retreat’ offerings. It is also important to note that local women do not expose their bodies in a group setting or in front of men. As I discovered in Jenaro Herrera, women usually bathe in communal rivers wearing their clothes, such as shorts and vest tops, in order to keep themselves covered up.

Many Western women travel alone to engage in ayahuasca ceremonies and retreats. Within local Amazonian communities a woman travelling alone is perceived as an oddity at the very least, and much worse, represents a potential target for sexual predators. I remember sitting at the port in Jenaro Herrera one day waiting for a *lancha* to Iquitos and being asked by a young boy who was interested in where I was from and what I was doing in the town, “*Do you not have friends?*” followed by, “*Where is your family?*” For this boy, a lack of familial ties or friends seemed to be the only conceivable reason why I would travel alone away from my

home country and to the other side of the world. This example speaks to the alien-like identity which solo female travellers embody for many local people, an identity which contributes to their vulnerability in such contexts. It is indeed very common for locals in the Iquitos region to question women travelling alone about whether they have a husband or children, and about their seemingly ‘missing’ family. As well as being greeted with innocent curiosity, a woman without family nearby is likely to be perceived as having no protection and can therefore make her appear as being more open to a sexual encounter.

Foreign participants’ desire for a healing experience coupled with their unfamiliarity with local healing practices makes them particularly susceptible to some form of sexual abuse. To complicate matters, the ayahuasca healing experience attracts many women who have experienced sexual abuse in the past and are seeking healing from such trauma; furthermore, research shows that women who have experienced sexual abuse in the past are sadly vulnerable to repeat attacks (Messman & Long 1996).

Victims and survivors of sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts commonly state that they were unaware at first of whether the shaman’s behaviour was ‘normal’ during the event of their abuse, as example 1 reflects. *La Doctora* lamented in an interview: “*they* [female ceremonial participants] *think that what the shamans are doing is normal, no it’s not!*” whilst the shamans think, “*they are not going to ask me why I am doing this, simply I am going to abuse ...they do it like a game*”. In example 2, being alone in this situation with the shaman meant the woman was without anyone else to check his behaviour or support her suspicions of malintent as the encounter unfolded. This example is typical of wider examples. Indeed, it has been a usual practice for women in retreat settings to be left alone with *ayahuasqueros* for supposed healing purposes and predator shamans have taken advantage of this fact and indeed, where possible, orchestrated these scenarios.

Ayahuasca retreats often take place in quite remote jungle locations where support in the event of attack may be unavailable. As the women in the first example experienced, it may also be difficult to obtain help following the attack due to a lack of available support in the vicinity including legal routes due to some local attitudes to sexual abuse as exhibited by these police officers. Despite being one of the first South American countries to legislate against sexual violence against women during the 1990s, impunity for sexual crimes remains high in Peru. This, some research suggests, is because the State is itself a perpetrator of sexual violence against women in that policeman, members of the army and men in political power are implicated as perpetrators, and due to the persistence of the State's patriarchal structure and values that place the importance of the male-headed family unit above women's security, also responsible for the normalization and suppression of sexual violence against women (Boesten 2012). A widespread culture of 'victim blaming' that has laid responsibility for occurrences of sexual abuse on female victims reaches across cultural boundaries (Kalra & Bhugra 2013).

Western women participating in ayahuasca retreats are furthermore a long way from home and potential support avenues and are unable to access the local legal system. It is of course very challenging to bring a case against a sexual abuse perpetrator from the other side of the world. Upon returning home, most choose not to pursue a case against the perpetrator and many do not speak about the abuse at all. Indeed, several women who shared their stories with me said they had not spoken about the incident previously.

Examples 3, 4 and 5 demonstrate how women can be subtly or forcefully manipulated into sexual acts within ayahuasca contexts. Some sexual encounters may be considered 'consensual' at the time of their occurrence but over time or in hindsight, some of these encounters, upon deeper reflection, become understood as being abusive. This is often the case in incidences whereby women have been coaxed into sexual relationships under the

guise of healing and apprenticeship. Quite commonly, perpetrators may claim that sexual encounters with clients and apprentices are acceptable within the healing context, as shown in example 4 where the apprentice was told by her *maestro* that his wife does not mind him having sex with other women, telling her that he previously had a foreign female companion. These examples demonstrate how Western women's lack of familiarity with local ayahuasca culture and practices can put them at greater risk than local women of being manipulated into taking part in sexual acts and abusive relationships.

In addition to usual manipulation techniques, the use of shamanic techniques for the purpose of manipulation and abuse is represented by examples 3 and 5. These techniques are based on local beliefs and may be used, initially at least, unbeknownst to most Western participants and potential targets of sexual abuse, at least in theory. Most transient foreign participants in ayahuasca shamanism are completely unaware of local ideas about the possibility of spiritual rape, for example, and the potential for other forms of spiritual attack or manipulation within shamanic contexts which are believed to lead to physical sexual attack. According to my informants, spiritual rape may occur unbeknownst to the person, having a negative effect on them, as described by La Doctora, but without them knowing the cause of this. While insiders among my research participants in Iquitos often connected sexual abuse cases with acts of *brujería*, most Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism are unaware of the existence of *brujería* or are dismissive of its potential power and influence in this setting. As addressed in the previous chapter however, this usually changes through immersion in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos involving encounters with *brujería*, either personal or through gossip and the cases of companions. In cases I knew of where the cause of sexual abuse or seduction was deemed to be magical, as in example 5 with the "spell", the person who experienced this was immersed in the community and aware of the possibility; in this case the woman was told by a male apprentice and a male friend that they thought she was under a spell, leading her to

interpret her experience this way. While the possibility of someone who ‘doesn’t believe in it’ being affected by a love spell, or indeed *brujería* more widely, is generally accepted by most insiders in the Iquitos community, this possibility is not verifiable. There is also the question of what constitutes locally conventional and acceptable uses of seduction techniques and if any could be considered as such rather than as forms of attack, a boundary which becomes blurred within the realm of Amazonian love magic, a prevalent local practice, which I will address further below.

As examples 6 and 7 demonstrate, it is considered acceptable by some individuals in the ayahuasca community for *ayahuasqueros* to sometimes have sexual relations with female participants in ceremonial and related settings. It is not unheard of for local women to sometimes have sex with shamans following receiving healings from them in a consensual manner. In one case in my research a child had been conceived in this context, with no suggestion it was morally dubious, and in another, a long-term relationship had started this way. It was also suggested by one Western male practitioner in my research that in the past payment for healings from local healers had sometimes been given in the form of sex with women in local communities. His suggestion was that this possibility provided some potential historical basis for current local attitudes, leaving a remanence of expectation amongst some local shamans for sexual favours in return for their services.

The attitude of the men in example 6 shows more concern for tactfulness than integrity with regards to the *ayahuasquero*’s actions, and no concern for the vulnerability of the woman involved. While this seems insensitive and immoral to the Western onlooker, their reactions help us to understand the divergent moralities and relational dynamics that can be involved. So, what might seem to be an obvious transgression of acceptable behaviour to some Western participants, among some *ayahuasqueros* is considered an acceptable form and outcome of sexual dynamics. They do not think that there is a problem with having sex with a Western

female visitor who seemingly has no husband or partner and behaves in ways, intentionally or not, that can be perceived as her idolizing the shaman and local culture, and thus further appearing as a possibly willing sexual partner.

Power Relations and Sexual Abuse

Sexual relations with a participant by *ayahuasqueros* who could otherwise be considered their patient seems an obvious abuse of power to many Westerners. Yet, power dynamics between shaman and patient are greatly complicated in touristic settings. One reason for this is because Western clients come from more economically and educationally privileged backgrounds than shamanic leaders of ceremony. Initialising sexual relations with them may be considered an acceptable upwardly mobile route through which an *ayahuasquero* might gain more status, for instance entering into business as well as sexual and romantic relations with Western women, as has become more common within this industry.

These ‘conquests’ must also be considered within the context of the tensions (political, economic, cultural and racial) that exist across the ayahuasca industry, especially between Amazonian shaman and Western business owners. Sexual access to and relations with female clients might be considered fair compensation by Amazonian shamans for their sharing of knowledge and tradition, a way to benefit from an industry which is largely controlled by Western men. As addressed previously, it is usual for local *ayahuasqueros* working in the ayahuasca industry to complain about being under-paid by Western centre owners who they typically argue profit from their knowledge without compensating them properly (these arguments resoundingly refer to monetary compensation). Alex Gearin has also noted this theme, highlighting the contradictions between the idealistic ‘primitivism’ of Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism and Amazonians’ desires for accumulation and

economic resources manifested in the ways sorcery is used within the ayahuasca industry in the battle for wealth, status and international clients (Gearin 2022).

I argue that women may also be considered as commodities by some actors, fought over by both Amazonian and Western males in the industry. For example, it was suggested by one Western male apprentice that his *maestro* was jealous of his own sexual and romantic relations with some female participants in their ceremonies and retreats and had started sexually harassing women “*because he thought he should be getting some too*”. Indeed, women are in some cases perceived as objects of conquest in this realm of shamanic rivalries and warfare. As discussed in the previous chapter, these rivalries and warfare have been fuelled by the growth of the commercial ayahuasca industry. My research suggests that the increase in sexual attacks on women in these contexts is related to these developments.

Sexual ‘conquest’ in the context of shamanic rivalries can also be understood in relation to predation-seduction techniques of acquiring power (Fausto 2004, 2012). Sexual conquest, like stealing *dietas* from apprentices is a form of power acquisition. Within mestizo shamanism power is typically acquired from outside, most potently from other realms. A Western woman can also be considered in such terms. Sexual conquest of Western women then from this perspective is potentially a potent form of power acquisition, spiritually, and furthermore, in some cases, also in practical, material terms should the object of conquest become a supporter and ally providing access to money and clients.

Sexual relations between *ayahuasqueros* and female participants in ayahuasca shamanism are also considered acceptable by some Western facilitators and organisers of ceremonies and retreats who simply regard this as decisions among adults, or otherwise choose to ignore what would be usual codes of conduct within their home countries around similar relationships, deeming them inapplicable or unwelcome in this context. As the Western male organiser in

example 7 argued, sexual relations between *ayahuasqueros* and female participants may be seen as necessary for healing or at least an unharmed distraction. The transient nature of ayahuasca retreats with foreign participants who return home makes them opportune situations for perpetrators of sexual abuse, many of whom have not been held accountable for their actions by retreat organisers. Yet a key issue underlying the problem of sexual abuse within touristic ayahuasca contexts also represented by this example is the confusion and disagreement that exists within the ayahuasca community over what actually constitutes sexual abuse and what are proper codes of conduct for shaman/patient relations. The ethical codes of conduct for healer / patient relations posited by the facilitator in this example are not considered objectively applicable to this context. Indeed, cross-cultural contradictions exist between different perspectives of sexual relations and morality that conflict and overlap within the realm of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and its practice in touristic settings. I will explore this in the following section by looking at the relationship between sex, love and ayahuasca within mestizo Amazonian society in comparison with Westernised ayahuasca settings.

Sex, Love and Ayahuasca

Most Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism would probably argue that sex and ayahuasca are incompatible and contradictory concepts. As I have mentioned previously, this is largely due to their association of ayahuasca with sexual abstinence due to *dieta* rules. Yet, within mestizo Amazonian culture, the relationship between ayahuasca, sex and love is much more fluid and involved than outside novice perceptions might presume, as the significance of “love magic” (*pusanga*) within Amazonian shamanism represents

As addressed in Chapter Three, sexual prohibitions form a key part of shamanic *dieta* within ayahuasca shamanism and Peruvian *vegetalismo*. Thus, periods of sexual abstinence are a

requirement of shamanic apprenticeship. Sexual abstinence must be practiced during and for a designated period following plant *dietas* whereby following these prohibitions shows dedication to the plant spirit ally with whom one is dieting.

Sexual prohibitions within *dieta* practice are a feature of ayahuasca shamanism that has been emphasised through ayahuasca globalisation and the development of the modern “ayahuasca *dieta*”, a Western interpretation of traditional and diverse *dieta* practices (Gearin & Labate 2018). Generally, Western participants in ayahuasca ceremonies and retreats are instructed to follow strict dietary rules including sexual abstinence for several days at least (usually more) before, during and after an ayahuasca ceremony or retreat. Yet, sexual restrictions are not usually followed by *ayahuasqueros* outside of the context of plant *dietas*. As previously discussed by Daniela Peluso, sexual abstinence is not considered necessary for *ayahuasqueros* past the apprenticeship stage (Peluso 2014).

On the contrary, according to local gossip and the personal boastings of some *ayahuasqueros* themselves, *ayahuasqueros* and other shamans are considered to have heightened sexual libido and virility within *mestizo* Amazonian society, apparently remaining sexually active until old age. Furthermore, ayahuasca and other plant medicines are quite typically utilised locally for improving sexual performance: it is not unusual for shamanic plant *dietas* to be used for the purpose of regaining sexual health, and there are also many plant potions available at local markets said to bestow these benefits.

Within *mestizo* ayahuasca shamanism ayahuasca can be a facilitator of sexual and romantic relationships within human and non-human realms. Indeed, it is not uncommon for *ayahuasqueros* to have romantic and sexual partners in spirit realms. Some *ayahuasqueros* relate to ayahuasca itself (or *herself*) as a romantic spiritual partner, such as an *ayahuasquero* in my research who referred to ayahuasca as his “*novia*” (girlfriend), a statement I did not

take seriously at first but later understood to be more literal than I had initially considered. Within popular Amazonian mythology Dolphins (*bufeos*) are said to transform into attractive men to seduce human women while mermaids (*sirenas*) transform into irresistible women to seduce human males, luring them into their underwater realms. These dolphins and sirens are furthermore depicted as *gringos* within these tales (Barbira-Freedman 2014:138), which sheds some light on Amazonians' perceptions of *gringos* as both seductive and deceitful. Don Luco told me that dolphins have the same spirits as human-beings, an interesting insight that provides some basis for their mating within Amazonian mythology and does not align with Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism (1998), which conceives of *all* beings or souls within Amerindian cosmology as the same but with corporal differences, although his analysis is mainly focused on animals. Don Luco clearly distinguishes between the spirits of trees and the spirits of people. These observations warrant further investigation that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Sexual relations with non-humans are considered a way through which humans may pass between worlds and indeed, be permanently transmuted into non-human worlds. *Sirenas* are usually painted as deceptive as well as seductive beings with malintent in these stories. Yet, shamans apparently enjoy a level of agency in these relations, being able to engage voluntarily in relations with *sirenas* and return to land continuing life as usual. Mestizo *ayahuasquero* and *vegetalista* El Maestro from Jenaro Herrera, for example, has a *sirena* girlfriend. As his granddaughter explained to me one day, she is told to stay away from her grandfather by family members when he is angry because it is at these times he often goes to see his *sirena* girlfriend and the family worry that one day he may decide to stay with her.

A European practitioner in my research divulged that he had many spirit entity girlfriends, which he had acquired through dieting over a several year period and drinking ayahuasca. Some ayahuasqueros may have a "*spiritual wife*" (Peluso 2014: 237). These relationships are

an underexplored aspect of ayahuasca shamanism that deserve greater scholarly attention than can be given here. For this discussion, it is significant to note that within the world of Amazonian shamanism sexuality is not separated from spirituality, as it so often is within ‘Western’ mind-sets, and sexual relations can be enjoyed by *ayahuasqueros* within the spiritual plane. These examples provide wider context for the claim by local practitioners referenced above that spiritual rape of female participants by *ayahuasqueros* within ceremonies is quite common.

Within the local context ayahuasca is also a vehicle through which human love matches can be made and sexual conquests seduced with the use of *pusanga* (love potions). Although not widely recognised at the global level, ayahuasca is often employed for the purpose of ‘love magic’ (“*la ciencia de amor*”) in Amazonian settings whereby *ayahuasqueros* and other shaman assist their patients to attract romantic love interests or reconcile broken relationships, often for a high premium. In the Iquitos region, my research suggests, ayahuasca is used for love magic purposes seemingly as much as it is used within *curanderismo*. Indeed, De Rios estimates that within her research in 1977 with Don Hilde and his patients in Iquitos, about a quarter of his adult patients were women who sought help to heal broken relationships or otherwise harm lost lovers with the use of hex *pusangas* (De Rios & Rumrill 2008:29). As this evidence reflects, love magic is commonly used by women in the Iquitos region. Within my research both men and women used love magic, but women’s usage was considered much more typical. This is in contrast with other available ethnographic examples where love magic is used almost exclusively by men to attract female lovers, providing a culturally acceptable explanation for female sexual desire, which is otherwise sanctioned (Bennet 2003: 153) or considered non-existent or extra-ordinary (Eves 2020: 434). Although women can typically be expected to be subservient to men in Amazonian society in particular settings (Peluso 2014), it is considered acceptable for them

to be sexually active and seductive within mestizo Amazonian society. However, men are viewed as more promiscuous. This is perhaps why magic intervention might be considered more necessary for women to secure a man's devotion.

Love spells are usually referred to by mestizos as "*un amarre*" and are a kind of *pusanga*. *Pusanga* refers to luck magic mostly using plants for the purpose of seduction or affecting one's will or motivation in ways that the maker of the concoction intends (Barbira-Freedman 2010, 2012; Peluso 2003, 2021; Shephard 2016; Padilla 2021). As well as referring to luck in love and the practice of conjoining human love partners, *pusangas* are used in hunting magic to attract prey, and within shamanism to attract spirits, the use of which highlights the connection between seduction and predation in hunting and shamanism within Amazonia (Taylor 1996; Barbira-Freedman 2010; Peluso 2014, 2021; Shephard 2016). Love spells in the form of plant essences or perfumes may be put on the clothing or skin of the target having a seductive or harmful effect (Padilla 2021:89). Within ayahuasca shamanism *amarres* are usually enacted through the use of special songs or enchantments as they are usually referred (*encantadores*), sung to one (or occasionally both) romantic love partners in the context of ayahuasca ceremonies or outside. These spells also often involve the use of a photograph of a romantic partner who the client wishes to attract, which may be buried in the ground by the shaman conducting the *amarre* and are the focus of his/her enchantments (*encantadores*).

The practice of love magic occupies an ambiguous position within the locality of Iquitos, positioned in a 'grey area' between healing and *brujería*. It is widely practiced locally and considered an acceptable form of magic and seduction by many of the local population but is given the status of low level *brujería* by some who consider it to be a form of manipulation which threatens free will. Love magic is generally a covert practice within mestizo Amazonian society, conducted by one potential or abandoned romantic partner. Ethnographic examples from Papua New Guinea describe the outrage felt by women who discover they

have been subjected to the powers of love magic (Leavitt 1991; Smith 2014; Eves 2020). Yet, within mestizo society, its use is not always viewed negatively by those involved.

For example, El Espiritista spoke openly about using love magic to attract and seduce his current partner with whom he has lived happily for many years; several times I witnessed him speak of this magical seduction in her presence, to which she responded with a smile. When questioned about the morality of love magic, he argued that it only works if it is God's will. Western practitioners I spoke to on the subject of love magic said they did not practice it and resoundingly disapproved of it due largely to the belief that its use threatens individual free will. These differences relate to cultural differences around perceptions of sexual abuse between mestizos and Westerners. Within the mestizo context an element of meddling in human affairs and affecting another's perception and behaviour through magical 'seduction' techniques is widely considered morally acceptable, with human action positioned as inferior to or as being at the mercy of God's will, or put another way, with ultimate responsibility considered as being in God's hands; whereas according to typical Western views, an individual's freedom to act and to choose is considered paramount, and ultimate responsibility associated with human agency, thus rendering actions that affect another's agency unacceptable.

According to some of my research participants, sexual abuse of female clientele within the context of love magic practices is apparently quite common. As already mentioned, shamans may take advantage of love magic contracts in order to have sex with vulnerable clientele by suggesting that sex with them is necessary for the spell to be effective. Mestizo *ayahuasquera*, La Doctora, lamented on this issue, "*simply to abuse them, they get them naked, they take advantage of their desperation, the suffering of these women*". In these instances, female clientele may be persuaded to have sex with the shaman enacting the love spell in the interest of winning the lover they truly desire. Yet, also, love magic may

apparently be used on ceremonial participants unknowingly. This phenomenon was attributed to abuse cases of Western participants by several experienced insiders among my research participants. In these instances, *amarres* are used by shamans as a means of coercing ceremonial participants into having sex with them. It is arguable that love spells would not be effective on someone who did not believe in them. Insider opinions usually contend with this position, but it is impossible to draw conclusions about this point, as interpretations of sexual abuse cases along these lines only come from those with knowledge of love magic and *brujería*, as we saw in example 5. Those targeted by these “*spells*” are typically overcome by feelings of attraction towards the shaman, which also have the effect of making them “*feel kind of crazy*”, as the research participant from example 5 described. These sentiments are echoed in other ethnographic accounts of the use of love magic where the effects have been likened to madness (Lepowsky 1998: 133; Wardlow 2006; Eves 2020: 436).

The existence and popularity of love magic practices within mestizo Amazonia shows that seduction through the use of ayahuasca and shamanic techniques is a local concept that is often considered to be an acceptable form of seduction. Furthermore, the act of a shaman manipulating a female ceremonial participant into having sex may also be an exercise in control and egotism demonstrative of personal power, to oneself and perhaps one’s peers. Battles for power and status are indeed at the core of relations between *ayahuasqueros* in the ayahuasca industry and beyond. The practice of love magic also further complicates boundaries within healer/patient relations that may otherwise appear to many Western participants as clear cut and adds a new perceived dimension to a consideration of conceivably consensual sexual encounters between healer and patient in ayahuasca contexts.

Thus far, I have argued that Western participants’ lack of awareness of local culture and practices coupled with their romantic misconceptions, make them easy targets for perpetrators of sexual abuse. The informal nature of the ayahuasca industry means there are

no formal codes of conduct or overriding governing bodies to enforce them as we find in the medical profession. This makes bringing perpetrators to justice or stopping them from working in the field quite difficult. There has been little if any protection for vulnerable women in touristic ayahuasca contexts and those who have been attacked often feel unable to come forward and speak up about it. This is usual for victims and survivors of sexual abuse due to feelings of shame (Weiss 2010; Hlavka 2017). Some victims and survivors in ayahuasca contexts have been shamed into feeling responsible by outside parties, whilst others may feel embarrassed about their own 'naivety', a common sentiment among my research participants which perpetrators have been able to take advantage of in touristic ayahuasca contexts. Some women also feel confused about their level of responsibility within abusive interactions and indeed, about whether abuse has actually taken place.

False expectations of shamans fuelled by romanticism coupled with clashes between local moralities and practice and Western moralities associated with ethical codes in the medical profession have created conditions in which the potential for abuse is high and at the same there is confusion and disagreement within the field of ayahuasca shamanism over what constitutes sexual abuse. Much responsibility surely lies with the foreigners who mediate encounters between Western participants and local *ayahuasqueros* to make participants aware of the incongruencies between Western perceptions of ayahuasca shamanism and shamans, and local culture and practice, and to mediate these encounters. Yet, many actors within the ayahuasca industry have been more concerned with 'selling' the romanticised version of ayahuasca shamanism and shamans typically imagined by Western spiritual seekers, than with protecting them against sexual and other kinds of abuse that might occur (such as psychological, financial and spiritual). Against a back-drop of confusion and mixed interests, speaking out against sexual misconduct within ayahuasca healing spaces has often been met

with resistance. This has started to change within the climate of the #MeToo movement in recent years.

Within this context, anthropologist activist scholars have argued that anthropological methodologies whereby individuals are encouraged to enter unfamiliar social environments alone and expect to suffer as part of their anthropological initiation, puts female researchers at risk of sexual violence (King et. al. 2020). I would argue, for reasons outlined previously, that female novice ayahuasca seekers have found themselves in a similar position. As reports of sexual abuse at the hands of *ayahuasqueros* and religious leaders began to surface across global ayahuasca contexts during my research fieldwork (Peluso 2014; Méndez 2015; Fernández 2018; Sánchez Sarmiento 2018; Benedito & Böschmeier 2019), I became involved in a community initiative by the *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Medicines* to create a set of guidelines which outline typical scenarios in which sexual abuse takes place in ayahuasca contexts and provide advice for the protection of potential participants in ayahuasca ceremonies and related healing contexts (Chacruna 2019).

The Chacruna Guidelines

As a member of the *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines* 'Ayahuasca Community Committee' I led the initiative to produce the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* (Chacruna 2019); the work began in early 2018. This set of guidelines for current and potential ayahuasca ceremonial participants was produced through a collaborative process with other anthropologists of ayahuasca



Figure 15: Sharing the 'Guidelines with IPeru Tourist Information Service, Iquitos.

shamanism, as well as sexual abuse experts, ayahuasca community practitioners and participants including victims and survivors of sexual abuse in these settings, and other colleagues across the psychedelic science community. Communication was primarily conducted via email, with some longer conversations over the phone or via Zoom, and some face-to-face conversations, when possible, between the primary writers and other contributors at conferences for example, when possible. The '*Guidelines*' were written by me, Daniela Peluso and Bia Labate, and edited in communication with others. Based largely on long-term research experience in ayahuasca communities, including my own doctoral fieldwork in the Iquitos region, the guidelines provide advice for participants in ayahuasca shamanism aimed at safeguarding them against abuse as well as raising awareness of the problem of sexual abuse more widely (See Appendix C for full copy of the guidelines). In addition to sharing the '*Guidelines*' with relevant international organisations such as MAPS (Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies) (Sinclair and Labate 2019), I distributed paper copies of the '*Guidelines*' on the ground in subsequent fieldwork periods in Iquitos, sharing them with potential participants in ayahuasca shamanism, tourist 'hot-spots' in the city, tourism and government agencies including the British Embassy in Peru, and ayahuasca retreat centres (Sinclair 2019).

The process of producing the '*Guidelines*' was a difficult one due to the challenges of addressing an issue that spans global contexts, the need to communicate across cultural boundaries, and due to tensions related to this (Peluso, Sinclair, Labate and Cavnar 2020). The very creation of a set of guidelines for potential targets of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings was opposed by a small but vocal group of feminist psychedelic researchers and activists including men as well as women, who considered the project to be a form of "*victim blaming*", laying the responsibility for avoiding sexual attacks solely in the hands of victims. They voiced their objections largely through social media when the '*Guidelines*' were first

published. It was felt by creators of the guidelines that as long as the informal and expansive cross-cultural nature of the ayahuasca industry and the enormity of the general problem of sexual abuse makes stopping perpetrators challenging and the continuation of sexual abuse was increasing, that information sharing aimed at informing and empowering potential targets of sexual abuse and raising community wide awareness seemed a reasonable practical recourse of action towards combatting the problem. References to clothing and behavioural choices within the guidelines and the inferences these choices might have within Amazonian culture were especially criticised. Anthropologists argued that it is partly a lack of cultural awareness enabling informed decision making that has put ceremonial participants at risk, and therefore it was imperative to draw potential participants' attention to this for their safety. Edits were made to improve the presentation of these points for a post #MeToo Western audience.

These debates clearly represented the difficulties of cross-cultural interaction in the context of globalising ayahuasca shamanism, within and upon which 'correct' modes of communication and behaviour cannot be unanimously defined or otherwise imposed by 'outsiders'. This project, like any involving cross-cultural engagement, called for an awareness of cultural relativism. In my view, if we were to uphold the Western feminist and social justice rhetoric, then we would be choosing concern with political correctness over concern for the safety of women in ayahuasca settings.

Chacruna's Ayahuasca Community Committee decided that the guidelines would focus on sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism as evidence showed that women were resoundingly the targets of sexual attacks in ayahuasca settings. Another side of gender-based abuse between Amazonians and Western visitors to the region is that Western men are manipulated into romantic and sexual relationships with local women who prey on them for their money and the social status they might acquire through being with a *gringo*. It is not

unusual to find Western men who have been devastated both financially as well as emotionally by broken relationships with local women in Iquitos, often involving children and their long-term maintenance.

It was also decided that the '*Guidelines*' should take a materialist approach to sexual abuse in line with the views of most of their potential readership, being predominantly from Western countries and we envisaged, unfamiliar with, or inexperienced in ayahuasca practices and cultural belief systems surrounding them including therefore, the existence of *brujería* and seduction techniques. It was also felt that over-emphasis on magical seduction and *brujería* might alienate much of the readership who would not take these possibilities seriously risking their dismissal of the whole document. However, a reference to the use of shamanic practices by some shamans 'to influence participants into feeling attraction towards them, through love magic and other techniques' was included in guideline 15, to acknowledge this possibility, and indeed also be taken seriously by insiders, as proposed by me, having encountered interpretations of sexual abuse of this kind frequently in the field. The '*Guidelines*' were received largely positively across the ayahuasca community, especially by women who had experienced sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts in the past and those who were curious about taking ayahuasca abroad. One woman who had experienced sexual abuse stated in her interview that if she had read the '*Guidelines*' before coming to Iquitos "*it probably would have saved me from the abuse happening*". Within Iquitos, the '*Guidelines*' received a lot of interest from transient participants in ayahuasca shamanism and were welcomed by tourism and government agencies, which led to an invitation to a forum in Lima on sexual abuse connected with a wider Government project to combat sexual abuse in Peru, the formation of which is on-going.

The reception among established people in the ayahuasca community there was more mixed. The ayahuasca community in Iquitos is generally suspicious of 'outsiders' and resistant to

outsider efforts to influence them. Whilst my ‘insider’ status meant I was listened to and had access to key actors, the production of a set of guidelines by an organisation outside the community highlighting the problem of sexual abuse in its midst was not attractive to everyone. Several retreat centres shared the ‘*Guidelines*’ through their websites and social media channels while some centre owners showed interest, but did not publicise as we had hoped, presumably because publicising information about the possibility for sexual abuse was in conflict with their commercial interests, or they were concerned that it could result in scaremongering. Also, even where acknowledgement of the wider problem is present, centres do not wish to inadvertently infer that their staff might be involved in such practices.

There was also some resistance to the *Chacruna Guidelines*’ from some Western males in the Iquitos community on the grounds that the *Guidelines*’ claim that sexual abuse is “*quite prevalent*” in ayahuasca contexts was exaggerated. One man went as far as posting a YouTube video specifically arguing against this claim³⁶. His main contention was that there was no quantitative evidence to support this claim. Of course, as the ‘*Guidelines*’ state, “*exact numbers are difficult to obtain, as most cases never come to light*”. Whilst a couple of men supported his arguments in a Facebook thread below the online post, it was vehemently objected to by other people, predominantly women, one of whom posted, “*I’ve been coming to the Amazon for over a decade for months at a time, and I can assure you there is rampant sexual violation happening in the ayahuasca community..*”³⁷ The YouTube video suggests that the man’s concerns about protecting the reputation of ayahuasca may have interfered with his objectivity on this matter. Some efforts to argue against the prevalence of sexual abuse or ‘cover it up’ are perhaps more sinister.

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIVcVeHXRv8>.

³⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ayahuascaworld/>.

One prominent male actor in the Iquitos community over many years who had previously established a Facebook page purportedly for posting warnings against perpetrators of sexual abuse in the vicinity suggested to me in personal communication that sexual abuse was no longer a problem in Iquitos, saying that there had been no reports of sexual abuse through his page for two years. Apart from the fact that many people are unaware of his Facebook page, might not be on social media or are not comfortable posting such messages, I later learned from an insider that only reports whereby perpetrators have been prosecuted are allowed to be posted on the page. As we have seen the likelihood of perpetrators being brought to justice is very low in the local region and especially within the tourism context in which most victims and survivors return to their home countries shortly after the event of abuse. Thus, the page effectively acts as a protector of perpetrators and a smokescreen for sexual abuse within the ayahuasca industry. The man who established this page also told me that the Ayahuasca Safety Association (ASA) in Iquitos was dealing with any sexual abuse cases that arose there, something I knew was untrue, although they had published rules as guidance for ceremonial facilitators, which included the instruction to “*Never sexually, spiritually, psychologically, or physically harass or abuse a participant*”, and advised against establishing sexual or romantic relationships with ceremonial and retreat participants during and for at least three months following, as referenced in the introduction to this dissertation. While some centres have incorporated these rules and do enforce them for their facilitators, full enforcement of such rules is clearly difficult and perhaps unrealistic. Enforcement of such rules is also complicated by the complexities of human relationships and the fact that some non-abusive romantic and sexual relationships may be and are indeed established between participants and facilitators and/or shamans in ayahuasca contexts.

Several men and women, including indigenous female informants on the ‘*Guidelines*’ project, felt that attention needed to be given to the fact that some women seek out relationships with

shamans. This can cause problems in local communities. This phenomenon is mentioned in the *Guidelines*’ as is the possibility of forming meaningful romantic and sexual relationships through engagement in ayahuasca shamanism. It is quite usual for transient participants in ayahuasca shamanism to enter willingly into relationships with *ayahuasqueros* and ceremonial facilitators during or following their ceremonial experience. Some women speak positively about sexual encounters with shamans and report feeling empowered through these relationships (Peluso 2014). Whilst this is not condemned, the *Guidelines*’ warn against entering into these relationships within ceremonial and retreat contexts as one’s judgements might be influenced by the effects of ayahuasca and these encounters may also act as a distraction from personal healing work.

While the *Guidelines*’ were of course mainly concerned with the welfare of potential targets for sexual abuse, *ayahuasqueros* and facilitators may also find themselves in difficult positions in their interactions with retreat participants who want to initiate relationships with them and may experience problems because of this. Of relevance here is the projection of feelings that can occur quite typically between patient and therapist known as transference and countertransference in medical and therapeutic settings (Guttman 1984; Gabbard 1995; Lijtmaer 2004). This issue is commonly experienced by both male and female practitioners and facilitators in the ayahuasca industry (Peluso 2014), especially their becoming the object of retreat participants’ projections and sexual/romantic desires. Many retreat participants share feelings they may never have expressed before with ayahuasca retreat facilitators as they go through intense healing experiences. It is no surprise then that they may develop feelings for the person guiding them through this process.

Whilst it is widely accepted that sexual relationships between doctors or therapists and patients are inappropriate as uneven power dynamics place doctors and therapists in the position of responsibility, there are no established professional codes of practice for the

ayahuasca industry. Many facilitators act responsibly by not entering into relationships with retreat participants, perhaps helping them to understand these feelings. However, they may still experience problems. Some people who felt rejected have later complained to retreat centres and organisers that facilitators acted inappropriately in leading them on, and partners and spouses of retreat participants have sometimes been in contact with individuals and centres enraged due to discovering their partner's infatuation with their retreat facilitator after their return home. These incidents are not so uncommon.

Of course, some facilitators and practitioners enter into sexual and/or romantic relations with retreat participants, which appear at least to be consensual at the time. Many *ayahuasqueros* and facilitators have had flings with retreat participants during or more often following ayahuasca retreats. The existence of 'grey areas' around consent and what constitutes abuse was of central concern to my research participants in Iquitos.. A common argument, especially among men within the Iquitos community, is that if both parties involved are consenting adults, there is no problem. However, the giving of consent and rules surrounding consent are only as effective as people's understanding and use of them (Borges, Banyard & Moynihan, 2008). Consent always occurs with specific socio-political contexts so 'mutual consent' requires that both parties can communicate intelligibly with each other and understand each other's behaviour within the social context in which consent is being given (Alexiades & Peluso, 2002). Misunderstandings and miscommunication between participants and practitioners within touristic ayahuasca settings are quite commonplace due to cross-cultural differences in gender dynamics and behavioural norms, confused stereotyping, and the unfamiliarity of ayahuasca practices for most Western participants. Within these contexts, Western practitioners and facilitators may also take advantage of participants' confusion around what constitutes normal practice, or themselves consider familiar codes of conduct inapplicable. As a cultural space inhabited by multiple overlapping moralities, and diverse

actors including many seeking to escape the confines of their ‘culture’, touristic ayahuasca contexts are also conceived of by many Western actors involved as existing and functioning beyond the usual constraints of culturally defined moral, gendered and behavioural codes of conduct.

Since the publication of the ‘*Guidelines*’ the issue of sexual abuse in psychedelic spaces including ceremonies and therapeutic sessions with ketamine and MDMA, for example, has gained further publicity and has become central to debates in the field of psychedelics, for instance prevalent in talks and conversation at conferences like *Breaking Convention*, which I attended in 2023 and published an article on, addressing this theme among others (Sinclair 2023). The problem of creating formal guidelines or rules for what were previously, and traditionally non- regulated spaces is a big issue, due partly to the near impossibility of doing so especially in ayahuasca contexts outside of Western systems, but also due to the aversion of many insiders to this kind of formalisation involving the establishment and influence of some form or forms of governing body.

The value of the ‘*Guidelines*’ in my view is, as they were intended, as an awareness raising and safeguarding document, rather than regulatory, that also inspires conversation around a difficult and important issue, in the interest of moving towards healthier gendered and cross-cultural dynamics in ayahuasca contexts. This will necessarily entail improved understanding of cultural differences and ambiguities of perception around gender dynamics, sex and abuse, which goes beyond the scope of the ‘*Guidelines*’ but which I have attempted to elucidate somewhat in this chapter’s discussion.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered the different ways in which ayahuasca has been used as a vehicle for sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism. I have outlined typical

scenarios in which sexual abuse takes place in ayahuasca contexts in the Iquitos region including molestation during supposed ‘healings’, spiritual and physical rape, through the practice of love magic and *brujería*, and through conceivably ‘consensual’ encounters within the context of love magic contracts and apprenticeship and/or business contracts, or transient ceremonial and retreat settings. While sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism is a problem in local Amazonian contexts, I have discussed how the growth of the ayahuasca industry has created conditions in which the potential for sexual abuse of participants has increased. This is particularly the case in Iquitos which is the hub of international ayahuasca tourism and ayahuasca entrepreneurial efforts.

Conflicts of understanding around gender and behavioural norms in touristic settings have exacerbated the potential for abuse to take place. Cross-cultural stereotyping and misconceptions, including Western romanticism of shamanism and shamans and Amazonians’ exaggerated conceptions of Westerners’ wealth and sexual availability, has also contributed to the problem. While local cultural stereotypes about foreign women may make them seem more sexually available, it is also relevant that they may appear to be easy targets due to their general vulnerability because they are in unfamiliar territory. This is especially true for sole female participants in ayahuasca retreats.

Visitors to Iquitos who are unfamiliar with the particulars of ayahuasca healing practices are particularly susceptible to sexual abuse in ceremonial and related contexts. My initial ‘naivety’ as an ayahuasca novice about the possibility of sexual abuse occurring in ayahuasca healing settings was typical of Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism. Indeed, while it is local public knowledge that sexual abuse can take place usually in the form of molestation during healing sessions, almost all the Western women I spoke with during my research about their experiences with sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings had not even considered the possibility of sexual abuse before entering an ayahuasca retreat or ceremony. At the same

time, my research with experienced female participants in ayahuasca communities and activists on this issue suggests that the problem of sexual abuse has been known about for many years within ayahuasca communities. Due to rising awareness in ayahuasca communities and more publicly since the period my research took place, novice ayahuasca drinkers are now much more likely to know that sexual abuse happens in ayahuasca contexts and may take precautions such as partaking in ceremonies with experienced companions or attending women only settings, which are becoming more common and popular. However, the Iquitos ayahuasca industry remains male dominated and sexual abuse of female participants is still a problem.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the commercial and patriarchal tendencies and organisation of the ayahuasca industry have contributed to creating conditions in which predators have been able to sexually abuse women with few restrictions. A lack of accountability for perpetrators has existed for many years in these largely informal settings in which the problem of sexual abuse has seemingly been suppressed by many insiders.

I have also argued that within patriarchal social systems including mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, not only are ideas about sexual abuse normalised but some shamans may compete among each other over the conquest or seduction of women and/or desire them for their own upward mobility. This phenomenon, I argue, has increased within the commercialised environment of the ayahuasca industry fraught with cross-cultural tensions.

Yet, the situation is not 'black and white'. As we have seen in this discussion, there are a lot of 'grey areas' around what constitutes sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings. In regards to the cross-cultural communication on issues of sexual seduction and abuse, what is considered usual or acceptable in one setting may not be considered so in another. This applies to gender and behavioural norms as well as ayahuasca based practices. Examples that have been raised

during this discussion include naked or semi-naked bathing during retreats, which seemed irrelevant to western feminists but highly significant to indigenous Amazonian women; the practice of love magic , which may seem an acceptable seduction technique to a local Amazonian shaman but as an attempt to breach an individual's power by a Western participant; and the 'rules' of consent and professional codes of practice, which are presumed by some and unknown by others or not recognised as relevant to ayahuasca shamanism and also have disparate interpretations.

I have also considered how the worldwide #MeToo movement has facilitated greater awareness around gender and power dynamics and abuses taking place within ayahuasca contexts and how this has fuelled greater awareness and the willingness of individuals to speak more openly about abuse. However, as highlighted, there are also issues with conflicting value and belief systems around what constitutes abuse in these settings. There have certainly been clear developments in the direction of making women feel safer and trying to combat sexual abuse within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos in recent years. As addressed, some centres have established rules for their workers disallowing sexual relations with participants in retreats during and for a set amount of time following them. Breaking these rules has resulted in facilitators losing their jobs.

Examples from my research illustrate that local people recognise a need for female healers for female patients, which is closely related to women's safety. Indeed, all local *ayahuasqueras* in my research described the local practice of having female only healing environments whereby *ayahuasqueras* work together and alongside other women in the treatment of female patients. Following the #MeToo movement there has been a significant increase in the number of *ayahuasqueras* working in the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos and beyond. While this development is a positive step towards making women safer in ayahuasca settings, as a mirror of traditional local practice, it also suggests a lack of 'progress' in

actually combatting the occurrence of sexual abuse of female participants in male dominated ayahuasca environments. The practice of having women only environments, like the creation of the guidelines also, is a cautionary and protective measure for women, but still assumes male perpetrators of sexual abuse will continue to attack women in ayahuasca settings where men preside. Indeed, sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca shamanism remains a problem that is not yet fully resolved.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions

This dissertation has been a project in the de-romanticisation of ayahuasca shamanism. It has required scrutinising outsider perceptions and commercial representations of a spiritual healing industry centred around the ayahuasca brew, “Mother Ayahuasca”, and engaging the reader in confronting the dynamic dualities at the core of the practice.

Dismantling the Myth of “Mother Ayahuasca”

My thesis has dismantled the myth of “Mother Ayahuasca” at several levels as I will elucidate further in this concluding chapter. It has tracked how the appropriation of ayahuasca for healing and spiritual growth for Western participants has led to the commodification of “Mother Ayahuasca” as a purely benevolent, omniscient, healing entity and adaptations of practice due to the influences of Westernization and urbanisation have made way for the greater participation of female apprentices and shamanic practitioners. Yet, I have argued that behind the commodified image of “Mother Ayahuasca”, ayahuasca is much more ambiguous- it is capable of manifesting in male and female form and capable of producing harming as well as healing effects, operating as a shamanic ally in *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) through love magic and other practices, as well as *curanderismo* (healing) in traditional and touristic contexts. Contrary to the eco-feminist and anti-religious sentiments of Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism represented by the image of “Mother Ayahuasca” propagated by the commercial industry, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism is a male dominated practice traditionally and contemporarily, which functions largely through patriarchal hierarchies influenced by tradition, Christianity and indeed, the growth of the ayahuasca industry. Furthermore, contrary to commercial representations of an omniscient “Mother Ayahuasca” with purely positive agency, according to insiders, shamanic agency is considered the most significant force through which relations with human and non-human entities are formed and

negotiated, and ayahuasca's potential for healing and harm is mediated, manifesting as *curanderismo* (healing), *brujería* (sorcery/witchcraft) or other uses including sexual seduction and attack. I have argued that the growth of the ayahuasca industry has created the necessary conditions for a prevalence of *brujería* and sexual abuse, centring around shamanic warfare between predominantly male shamanic rivals over money, power, status and also, women. Furthermore, I have argued that *brujería* and sexual abuse elements of practice have been hidden by the commercial industry behind its presentation of a purely spiritual healing practice emblematised by "Mother Ayahuasca". My research suggests that this has contributed to the exacerbation of occurrences.

This thesis has brought these darker elements of ayahuasca shamanism 'to light' as well as emphasizing the inherent interconnectedness between 'dark' and 'light' elements of mestizo shamanic practice. I have argued that the ambiguities inherent in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism are evident within this contemporary touristic context in which spheres of shamanic practice are not gendered and in which the 'dark' and 'light' of shamanic cosmology and practice, healing and *brujería*, are considered interconnected facets, as developing interpretations of mental health problems and healing within *brujería* frameworks amongst experienced Western practitioners, are evidence for. In the following discussion I will expand upon these arguments, reflect upon my role as researcher-activist and outline avenues for future research.

Male Shamanic Agency: The Predator/Prey Motif

This dissertation has addressed gender dynamics through the lens of inter-species relationships, specifically those formed between shamanic apprentices and plant spirits including ayahuasca, upon which mestizo *vegetalismo* and ayahuasca shamanism is based. In Chapter Four I addressed the gender bias within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism arguing that

the practice of *dieta* is male-orientated within mestizo *vegetalismo*, due to the existence of gendered domains within mestizo Amazonian communities and the enduring association of *la dieta* and *vegetalismo* practice with the forest, traditionally a male domain. Thus, contributing a gendered perspective to the anthropology of the non-human, my research suggests that relations with master plant spirits that form the core of *vegetalismo* practice are more easily acquired by men in the mestizo context. My gendered analysis of chuyachaki mythology provides further evidence of men's association with the forest realm and their embodiment of the protector role in mestizo society, positioning men in the shamanic role of “*mastering the spirits*” (“*dominar los espiritos*”).

‘Master of Spirits’ or ‘Master of spiritual realms’ emerges as a definition for ‘shaman’ within my research. As presented in this dissertation, a *Maestro* is teacher or Master; ‘mastering the spirits’ (*dominando los espiritos*) is the role of the shaman; and the guidance consistently offered to apprentices during their apprenticeship training by mestizo *maestros* is that they must learn to ‘master the spirits’ or, alternatively ‘dominate the spirits’ (“*tienes que dominar los espiritos*”). Mastery applies to establishing relationships with heavenly and earthly spirits including predominantly plant spirits, which become spiritual allies and helpers (*ayudantes*) and can be called upon and directed by the shaman when correct dedication is shown through *dieta* practice; and also to mastering or dominating demonic spirits, considered connected to the personal psyche and also encountered in lower realms. A lack of mastery is associated with *brujería* as opposed to *curanderismo* practice.

Yet, the history of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism is a history of healing and warfare, built on the negotiation of relations with outsiders through the use of ayahuasca and wider *vegetalismo* practices, which also portrays the significance of *brujería* elements in conjunction with healing elements of ayahuasca shamanism, being interconnected facets of ayahuasca shamanism historically and to the present day. As the interlocutor between human

and non-human worlds and a bestower of knowledge and power, ayahuasca is a shamanic ally in both.

My analysis of the gender bias amongst shamanic practitioners challenges essentialist gendered perspectives on domains of shamanic practice that consider warfare and *brujería* elements as ‘male’ and healing elements as ‘female’ that have emerged within Westernized contexts and are evident within the commercial industry in Iquitos. While contemporary Western perspectives tend to associate healing with ‘the feminine’ and *brujería* with ‘maleness’ (Fotiou 2014), Don Luco’s history of mestizo shamanism as relayed in Chapter Four clearly presents male shamans as healers also armed with the capacity to defend their communities through the use of *brujería*, showing that male *ayahuasqueros* traditionally embody the role of *curanderos* as well as *brujos* within mestizo Amazonia, as protectors of their community engaged in *brujería* as well as healing. However, my research also revealed that male dominance of ayahuasca shamanism is connected by local female practitioners with the sexual abuse of female apprentices by male *maestros*, the threat of which or experience of acts as a deterrent against their participation.

I have argued throughout this dissertation that the ‘intrinsic link between warfare and shamanism’, as indicated by Carlos Fausto (Fausto 2004: 15) and outlined in Don Luco’s origin tale, is evident within the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos. Although social context has transformed over time, my research revealed that shamanic warfare is still a significant feature of contemporary shamanic practice in the Iquitos región. Indeed, allegiances between spirits and shamans that acted as the basis of mestizo shamanic warfare against colonising forces historically, now form the basis of shamanic rivalries and warfare within the ayahuasca industry. Building on recent scholarship that has pointed to a proliferation of *brujería* and shamanic warfare attacks within touristic contexts (Gearin 2021; Marcus 2022), I have argued that shamanic rivalries centre around battles for money, power, status, and, as my

thesis proposes, also women, with the commercialisation of ayahuasca creating greater temptation for shamanic practitioners and attracting practitioners with motivations for personal gain, material wealth, and furthermore, sexual conquest.

My research builds on existing discussions about the connection between hunting and shamanism and their relation to predation and seduction in the anthropological literature (DeCastro 1998, 2019; Alexiades 1999; Fausto 1999, 2012; Peluso 2004; Barbira-Freedman 2010; Costa 2010), which connect the archetypes of man the hunter and man the shaman, through predation and seduction practices, with the forest realm (Siskind 1973). My thesis proposes that the predator/prey motif connected with male shamanic agency in mestizo shamanism is evident in relations with Western apprentices and specifically, *gringa* apprentices

Focusing my analysis as throughout this dissertation on relations between shamans and their spiritual allies, I indicated how these allies may be stolen through warfare practice and argued that the stealing of shamanic allies has increased in the context of Western participation (Chapters Three and Seven). This is partly due to Westerners' naivety when first engaging in *dieta* practice, putting many novice participants at risk, and the disruption of traditional shamanic lineages due to Western influence, creating greater potential for mistrust and jealousy between *maestros* and their apprentices. I introduced the concept of 'shaman shopping', whereby Western participants and apprentices move between shamans seeking greater proficiency and healing, arguing that loyalty and distrust already a problem in the local region, have been exacerbated by the impact of the commercial industry involving Western participation. Due to their unfamiliarity with local practices exacerbated by 'shaman shopping', Western apprentices (and sometimes participants) fall quite easily prey to *dieta* stealing and loyalty spells (a form of *pusanga*) at the hands of their mestizo *maestros*,

practices of power stealing that my research suggests are widespread within the Iquitos ayahuasca industry.

Similarly, the predator/prey motif is applicable to sexual abuse and seduction of Western participants and female apprentices who, as described in this dissertation, are particularly vulnerable to seduction and attack due also to their unfamiliarity with local culture and practices. My analysis of the problem of sexual abuse highlights the vulnerability of sole women travellers who are considered unprotected by familial ties and therefore easy targets for perpetrators, or predators. My main contribution to existing analysis of sexual abuse within touristic ayahuasca contexts is the unique argument presented in this dissertation that within this system women are sometimes viewed as objects of conquest and, in the same way they compete over money, power and status, shamans may compete among each other over the seduction of western women and/or desire them for their own upward mobility. As proposed in Chapter Eight, sexual seduction and attack of Western female participants and apprentices can also be understood within this framework of the predator/prey motif associated with male shamanic agency as a form of power stealing.

I have argued throughout this dissertation that mestizo shamanism draws its power from outside sources through its incorporation of knowledges through cross-cultural encounters across time and space, negotiated through predominantly male shamanic agency, as described in Chapter Six. Shamanism has previously been presented as a site of resistance against the forces of civilisation (Chevalier 1982), as it has been viewed by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism who oppose Amazonian shamanism and culture with modern industrial society and lifestyles (Gearin 2016). Whilst it is contrary to their meaning, it could be said that it is through the very process of syncretism, rather than opposition, that mestizo shamanism has resisted these forces. Indeed, I suggest that rather than being appropriated by outsiders for *their* own use, mestizo ayahuasca shamanism appropriates outside influences for

its own use. This incorporation of outsider influences can be seen to be at the heart of mestizo Amazonian culture (Gow 2009; Santos-Granero 2009; Vilaça 2011, 2015), as explored in this dissertation through my analysis of the continuing cosmological development of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, negotiated through mestizo shamanic agency.

I propose that predation and seduction practices towards Western apprentices and specifically *gringa* participants can be understood also within this framework as a form of power acquisition from outside. It is noteworthy that women are widely considered as potentially being more powerful shamans by mestizo practitioners, and Western women, being considered ‘other’ may conceivably be considered a particularly potent source of power, which mestizo shamans may seek to acquire and dominate through the taking and sexual seduction and attack of *gringa* apprentices. Indeed, in Chapter Seven, I described how the battle for women, and specifically Western female apprentices, plays out through *brujería* accusations and healings between shamanic rivals in the Iquitos industry context, suggesting that *gringas* are indeed a desired object of conquest or acquisition amongst them.

Thus, while Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism are typically attracted to ayahuasca shamanism wanting to escape the confines - psychological, social, spiritual and geographical - of their Culture, seeking ‘re-connection’ with Nature; conversely, some shamans are motivated to engage in ayahuasca shamanism through their desires to overcome cultural boundaries through accumulation (Gearin 2022) associated with Western Culture and the industry, and, I argue, for sexual conquest of Western women. Indeed, my thesis reveals how many Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism seeking to escape the ills of patriarchal social systems and culture, connected with the Church, State and industrialised society are sadly met with, or reproduce the abuses of patriarchy in this alternative context.

Reflections on Rising Numbers of *Ayahuasqueras* and ‘All Female Retreats’

My thesis proposes that adaptations of traditional *dieta* practice, the erasure of the menstruation taboo and increasing focus on the use of ayahuasca as opposed to *palo* (tree) medicine through the influences of urbanisation, globalisation and the growth of the ayahuasca industry have opened the way for the greater participation of women in ayahuasca shamanism and wider *vegetalismo*. Following existing scholarship (Brabec de Mori 2014; Fotiou 2014), my research indicates a rise in demand for *ayahuasqueras* due to Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism and an increase in the numbers of *ayahuasqueras* working in the ayahuasca industry, with more mestizo and Shipibo women seemingly taking up professional shamanic practice partly in response to this rising demand. Furthermore, as my own position exemplified, *gringa* apprentices are not constrained by local gender norms and therefore more easily able to engage in *dieta* practice than local women and occupy positions usually reserved for men within mestizo shamanism; yet, as my appraisal of developing gender dynamics throughout this dissertation addresses, because of this apparent freedom, *gringas* are also in a vulnerable and potentially dangerous position. Indeed, I argue that rising demand for *ayahuasqueras* is also due to the prevalence of sexual abuse of female participants in touristic ayahuasca settings.

Recent scholarship also highlights the rise of ‘all female retreats’ (Fotiou 2014). I contributed evidence in Chapter Eight to argue that the practice of having women only healing environments is quite usual within local Amazonian contexts due partly to the perceived risk of sexual attack in male dominated settings. While Western participation in ayahuasca shamanism has brought focus upon the issue of sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings and it has seemingly increased in touristic contexts, it is clearly not a new phenomenon. Recent developments of practice within touristic settings aimed at safeguarding women such as the

introduction of women only healing environments and ‘all female retreats’, rather than being unique, are new manifestations of precautions already taken in local settings.

However, there are issues with ‘all female retreats’ in touristic settings which became apparent to me during post-fieldwork discussions. Speaking with a male friend in Iquitos one day he revealed his plans to hold ‘all women ayahuasca retreats’ for all female participants that would be orchestrated for Western women with Shipibo *maestras* in the region with whom he had worked previously. It struck me initially that he himself is a man. I wanted to understand more about his decision to do this and how these retreats would be organised and function. He explained that he had chosen to do this because of safety issues for women and the fact that “*a lot of women feel insecure in the space shared by men... for obvious, varied and valid reasons... many women I feel don’t come here due to safety fears*”, clearly related to the threat of sexual harassment and abuse. He also admitted he “*saw a marketing ploy in All Women Aya Retreats*”. I questioned him also about the Shipibo *maestras* whom he intended to ask. Did they usually work together? Only a couple of them he said had worked together before. Furthermore, it transpired that he would in fact be asking a male shaman to “*hold the space*” in line with their local tradition, he argued, “*while the maestras sing individually to the ladies.*”

While these retreats may serve a purpose for Western women and be run with relatively good intentions - I do not wish to tarnish this individual - this incidence is an example of how the sexual abuse of women in ayahuasca contexts has created a commercial opportunity for commercial ayahuasca retreat operators. This example also speaks to how commercial interests have interfered with local shamanic lineages and practices in which loyalty to one’s shamanic group is considered important and working with others outside of these groups, usually considered dangerous due to the threat of knowledge stealing and *brujería* attacks, as mentioned in Chapter Three. Furthermore, this example is representative of the continuing

male- hierarchal organisation of shamanic practice and the related ayahuasca industry in which an ‘all female retreat’ is actually being co-ordinated by a Western male and ceremonies led and overseen by a Shipibo male shaman. While this example is not representative of all women only retreats across the region, it is definitely the case that some of these are organised by male owned and run centres, as in the example of *The Temple of the Way of the Light*, whose ayahuasca ceremonies are usually led by male Shipibo shamans although include female *maestras* also.

While Western influence has contributed to an increase in the number of female shamans working in the Iquitos ayahuasca industry, the vast majority of them still work in assistant positions alongside men, reflecting how women’s access to shamanic knowledge is largely mediated through men (Barbira-Freedman 2010) with ayahuasca shamanism a male dominated domain; and how, while there is an increase in the number of female shamans working in the ayahuasca industry, the hierarchical organisation of the industry remains patriarchal. Some Shipibo female shamans do offer single-sex settings to female visitors in smaller centres or contexts. Yet, this raises another issue, posing a challenge to the social positioning of mestizo practitioners in the region who are less able to offer such settings due to there being fewer female shamans within mestizo communities, for reasons addressed in this thesis.

Beyond Duality

My thesis records the development of understandings of the dualities of gender and cosmology from being fixed, as is typical of Western layperson perspectives and those of transient Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism, to being in dynamic relation, as they are in the context of immersive practice in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism.

My research revealed that ayahuasca's gender as well as its uses is variable across different anthropological examples as well as within the mestizo context. Previous examples in the literature tend to essentialize the ayahuasca spirit as either female or male or present their informants as doing so (e.g. Grob et al, 1996; McKenna, Callaway & Grob, 1998; Narby, 1999; Highpaine 2013; Mijares & Fotiou 2015; Mesturini Cappo 2018). As discussed in Chapter Five, my research presents a different possibility: according to the majority of my most trusted and experienced research participants, mestizo and Western *ayahuasqueros* and *vegetalistas*, all plants including ayahuasca have both male and female genders and can manifest as either. Just as ayahuasca's gender is variable, so are its uses.

Ayahuasca as *Pharmakon*

The concept of *pharmakon* (poison/remedy) (from Plato e.g. Propokov 2019) is relevant to ayahuasca and the ambiguities and contradictions that accompany it. Within mestizo shamanism ayahuasca is indeed both poison and remedy, with its effect contextual rather than causal, and dependent on positionality within the relational field of ayahuasca shamanism due to the inherent interconnectedness between *brujería* and *curanderismo* practices.

Comparisons can be drawn between outsider and commercial Western perspectives of ayahuasca as materialist and objective, and mestizo and insider perspectives of ayahuasca and its effects as relational and subjective. The commercialisation of ayahuasca shamanism involving the commodification of "Mother Ayahuasca" has, as Fausto indicated for the appropriation of shamanism by the Western urban-middle classes, 'purged the phenomenon of all its ambiguities attributes' (Fausto 2004) seeking to identify it as a purely medicinal substance and healing entity and practice. I propose that the Western commercialised presentation of ayahuasca as purely a medicine is a reaction against the dominant culture which vilifies psychedelic plants and substances, labelling them as 'drugs'. Although the

distinction between drug/medicine is arguably an arbitrary and predominantly semantic one, it nevertheless has connotations and power within the Western countercultural movement within which the term ‘medicine’ is often used in defence of psychedelic plant substances (e.g. *Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines*) and opposed with ‘drugs’. This was evident amongst Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region. Although there was also recognition amongst more immersed Western participants that the difference between a ‘drug’ or ‘medicine’ really depends upon context of use.

Furthermore, whereas within the dominant Western culture ayahuasca is perceived as a drug, within the dominant Peruvian culture, shamanic practices are widely demonised as anti-Christian practices. As addressed in Chapter Six, mestizo practitioners’ claims that “*la brujeria no existe*” can to some extent be understood as being in defence of shamanic practices in general against local perspectives influenced by Christianity. Similarly, mestizo shamans’ emphases on their own practices being associated with Christianity and connected with God are to some extent a deflection against sorcery accusations. Thus, both Westerners and mestizos engaged in ayahuasca shamanism place emphasis on the healing capacities of ayahuasca and their own good intentions in the presence of ‘outsiders’ and transient participants, as a deflection against negative characterisations of ayahuasca and their practices.

Propokov proposes that ‘the magic of Socrates is a counter-magic to the bewitchment and jugglery of a sophistry and mimetic poetry. By enchanting pharmakon with epode Socrates neutralizes the risk of pharmakon being dangerous drug’ (Propokov 2019). Within this formulation the use of epode (incantation) is required in resistance to the dominant culture (in this formulation related to ‘sophistry and mimetic poetry’) to transform the indeterminant substance from a potentially dangerous drug into a medicinal cure, a concept which is applicable to ayahuasca shamanism within which skilled human interaction and agency is

required to produce healing effects. Taussig clearly presents yagé as a powerful and dangerous substance that must be blessed by mestizo shamans “so that Satan gets out of there” and those taking it are not tempted in to hurting others with its power (Taussig 1987:405-6). The importance of prayer and blessings of ayahuasca in mestizo practice is evident in my descriptions of ceremonial practice in local settings within which *medicina* relates to the presence of God and “*Madre*” to Mother Mary/The Madonna an iconic Christian figure throughout Latin America rather than “Mother Ayahuasca” (Hall 2004, see Chapter Six). Ayahuasca’s ambiguity was further emphasized by some practitioners, one of whom, a Western practitioner, explained he had recently discovered the importance of first cleansing the ayahuasca he drinks to ensure it does not contain any “*negative energies or spirits*”. This concern is presumably of greater importance when the ayahuasca one drinks has been cooked by another person, a phenomenon which has become quite widespread within the ayahuasca industry due partly to practical considerations and the need for centre owners to ensure there is enough ayahuasca for retreats.

My thesis has explored the ambiguous reality of ayahuasca as substance and spirit, the potentialities of which, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, hinge upon the force of shamanic agency. Indeed, while commercial representations of ayahuasca exaggerate the importance of ayahuasca’s agency, presenting ayahuasca as omniscient and its agency as purely positive, local and insider perspectives emphasize the greater importance of shamans’ abilities and intentions, as perhaps most clearly communicated in this dissertation by Don Luco’s statement that “*You can do anything with ayahuasca.*”

As explored in Chapters Six and Seven the path of the shamanic initiate involves the establishment and negotiation of relationships with spiritual entities who become helpers (*ayudantes*) and allies. These allies inhabit the upper, lower or earthly realms within a predominantly Christian cosmology. All the *mestizo ayahuasqueros* in my research

emphasised that the path to becoming a *brujo* entails failure to commit to proper apprenticeship training involving dedication to plant *dieta* practice, and rather, giving in to temptations from malevolent spirits for the sake of gaining personal power. Plant spirit allies acquired through *dieta* practice are considered integral for the enactment of healing (*curanderismo*) as opposed to more easily acquired *pactos* with spirits from lower realms involved in *brujería* practices.

Teachings and examples offered by *maestros* act as warnings against excessive individual power, a common theme within the literature on Amazonian peoples. Overing highlights the contrast between ‘Western individualism’, which contains the implication that collectivity is coercive, and the Amazonian ethos of conviviality, which is compatible with individual autonomy; indeed, among the Piaroa and many other Amazonian communities as Overing describes, the control of personal wild desires is a necessary part of creating socially harmonious relations, and , the achievement of individual autonomy is related to engagement in socially beneficial acts (Overing & Passes 2002). Similarly, within mestizo shamanism we saw how the practice of *medicina* is at once socially beneficial and life giving for the *curandero*, whereas socially disruptive acts aimed at personal power and material gain are eventually life diminishing for the individual.

Yet, my research evidence furthermore suggests that Western dualistic conceptions of Christian cosmology (Cooper 2000) are not appropriate when applied to mestizo Amazonian shamanism, which proposes more of a sliding scale from white magic *pura medicina* to black magic *brujeria* including green and red magic also; and produces practitioners with ambiguous intentions who often engage in varied aspects of practice.

A further point of significance not addressed throughout this dissertation thus far, is that one’s ability to decipher between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ spirits, spirits of *medicina* or demonic

entities associated with *brujería*, is not necessarily straightforward: ‘And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light’ (*The Bible*, 2 Corinthians 11:14), a sentiment often echoed and paraphrased by immersed participants in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos. Discernment is a necessary virtue on the shamanic path, which is widely considered as lacking amongst many apprentices within the ayahuasca industry and made more challenging by the temptations associated with this context, as outlined in Chapter Seven. Indeed, gossip amongst practitioners, apprentices and immersed participants in the ayahuasca community in Iquitos suggests that some apprentices make pacts unknowingly or that they later regret, and some are said to be working with spirits they believe to be helping them but that are actually demonic entities. This potential confusion further blurs the lines between ‘light’ and ‘dark’, *medicina* and *brujería*.

As this section has explored, while ayahuasca is often characterised by outside observers and transient participants as either a poison or remedy, or a medicine or drug, mestizos and Westerners immersed in ayahuasca shamanism acknowledge that ayahuasca is ‘not either/or, but both/and’, as non - dualism was defined by Joanna Cook in the Manchester debate of 2011 (Ventakesan et al. 2013), a concept that appeared throughout this dissertation in relation to Westerners’ cosmovision and interpretations of ayahuasca experiences, and that deserves further attention in its application to mestizo ayahuasca shamanism.

Non -Duality: Not Either/Or but Both/And

In the Manchester debate on non-dualism in relation to anthropology and ethnography Joanna Cook proposed that ‘if dualism/monism can be understood as either/or, non-dualism can be understood as both/and’, arguing that non-dualism, in contrast to dualism, ‘holds that different phenomena are inseparable, but it does not hold that they are all the same’ (Cook in Ventakesan et al. 2013). Marilyn Strathern confirmed that ‘non-dualism with no logical

partner encompasses both, as hybrids do' (Srathern in Ventakesan et al. 2013). These understandings of non-dualism are applicable to mestizo ayahuasca shamanism within which: ayahuasca is both male and female, containing both 'dark' and 'light' elements; shamans are both *curanderos* and *brujos*; cosmology and practice is both religious and spiritual involving encounters between human and non-human entities in spiritual realms; and furthermore, as proposed in this thesis, within which ayahuasca visions and experiences of *brujeria* may be interpreted as representative of both internal and external processes.

In Chapter Seven I discussed how local understandings of the interconnectedness between healing (*curanderismo*) and *brujería* have found new expression through novel understandings of healing through *brujería* attacks amongst Western practitioners and apprentices. My analysis highlighted a development in understandings of *brujería* in the field from typical local understandings in which the enemy is externalised, to typically Western understandings in which 'dark' visions are psychologised, to novel understandings within which *brujería* experiences are considered, not either, but both experiences of external attack and reflections of internal processes. This point relates to my own 'hellish' experience, which could be interpreted as an experience of psychosis and an experience of possession, both a reflection of my own fears and a *brujería* attack, and subsequently as a recognition of a part of myself that needed to be re-integrated enabling healing, thus becoming - not either/or but both an experience of *brujería* and healing. My developing understanding of this event is influenced by my own largely non-dual cosmovision, and furthermore, as addressed in my analysis in Chapter Six, indicative of how different interpretations of events occurring in the context of mestizo ayahuasca shamanism are not mutually exclusive, but both/and. This example and similar novel interpretations emerging in this context have implications for the treatment of mental health issues, which my research suggests may be beneficial to approach within a spiritual/shamanic framework.

I have indicated throughout this thesis that Westerners' non-dualistic cosmovision is not necessarily in conflict with the perspectives of Christian shamans in Iquitos, comparing non-dual perspectives of Westerners' experiences of *brujería*, including my own, with mestizo positions including that of El Maestro emphasizing that “*God created everything, the good and also the bad*” and Florencio in Taussig (1987:450-1) emphasizing that illness, whether *brujería* or not, is a gift from God. While there certainly appear to be similarities between the spiritual perspectives of mestizo shamans and that of Western practitioners immersed in the field of ayahuasca shamanism, there are issues with conflating Euro-American conceptions of non-dualism with indigenous cosmologies, as highlighted in the Manchester debates (Ventakesan et al. 2013), which warrant consideration here. Indeed, current arguments in the literature suggest that Western neoshamanic cosmologies focusing on “oneness” are usurping more ambiguous indigenous cosmologies in the realm of internationalised ayahuasca shamanism (Gearin & Saez 2021). I would argue however, that mestizo cosmologies bear more relation to Euro-American perspectives than indigenous cosmologies do considering their hybrid nature, and moreover, in the case of mestizo shamanism, encompassing varied spiritual and religious influences, as Western spirituality also does, incorporating influences from varied spiritual and religious traditions and geographical regions (Heelas & Woodhead 2005).

Furthermore, I have pointed to *novel* interpretations of healing ‘through *brujería*’, which have emerged through the encounter between Western and mestizo perspectives and practice in this hybrid space. In the Manchester debates Strathern questioned whether by non-duality we mean ‘boundary crossing or boundary dissolution’ (Starthern in Ventakesan et al. 2013). Gearin and Saez’s depiction of neoshamanic cosmologies focusing on “oneness” falls into the category of ‘boundary dissolution’. Yet, interpretations of *brujería* experiences as reflections of internal processes do not. Neither are they ‘boundary crossing’, but one and both at the

same time. These novel interpretations, I argue, are representative of the emergence of novel understandings of non-duality in this context that, while predominantly associated with Western practitioners, are also traversing cultural and ethnic boundaries through the cross-cultural encounters and exchange of beliefs and practice that is characteristic of relations between mestizo and Western apprentices in Iquitos. It is also significant that mestizo shamans and Western apprentices, to a great extent at least, develop their cosmological perspectives through engagement in their shared practice of ayahuasca shamanism and therefore it can be reasonably argued that their perspectives are likely be similar.

However, that is not to say they are the same. Indeed, as argued in the Chapter Six, one of the defining features of mestizo cosmology is its openness and adaptability, enabling multiple spiritual and religious perspectives to exist within its framework, negotiated through the agency of mestizo shamans in relation with human and non-human entities. Furthermore, my research reveals that different interpretations of the same event may exist in relative harmony within this framework of cosmology and practice. A key example of this from my research is “*the Mother*” in local and touristic practice. While some mestizo shamans have adapted their ceremonial practices by replacing the Virgin Mary with ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ within their *icaros*, Don Luco also pointed to the possibility that references to “*La Madre*” may be interpreted as referencing the Virgin Mary and ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ by mestizo and Western participants respectively. As similar archetypes in their respective traditions, I propose “*La Madre*” is not either/or but both/and.

Reflections: Ayahuasca as a Mirror

It is often said by both mestizos and Westerners engaged in ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos that ayahuasca is a “*mirror of the soul*” (“*un espejo del alma*”). According to this formulation the non-human is a mirror of the human. My research presents the belief that as

individual human beings, we contain masculine and feminine aspects, as plant spirits were also perceived by experienced *ayahuasqueros* among my research participants, with healing sometimes conceptualised amongst more immersed participants and practitioners in ayahuasca shamanism in Iquitos, as a process of balancing masculine and feminine aspects of energies within the Self. My research also presents the belief that just as ayahuasca contains ‘light’ and ‘dark’, so do we as human beings, as also evident in the perspectives of experienced practitioners, with healing also conceptualised as the removal of “*dark energies*” or spirits that have inhabited the psyche when trauma occurred causing suffering and mental illness; or related to aspects of the Self, which require ‘re-integration’. Furthermore, as emphasised throughout this thesis, the relationship between the categories of male/female and dark/light is not fixed, but shifting and dynamic. These reflections, I argue, have implications at the individual and societal level.

It is interesting to observe how most Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism willingly accept the concept and practice of spiritual healing through shamanic ritual and psychedelic plant medicine but are much more sceptical about the existence of ‘dark’ shamanism - *brujería* in the Iquitos context. This scepticism is also widespread among academic researchers of ayahuasca and Western participants in broader ‘spiritual’ practices, as I have encountered through personal experience.

As presented in this dissertation, my research suggests that Westerners’ aversion to ‘the dark side’ of ayahuasca shamanism is connected with Western romanticism, which has been fuelled by the commercial industry in the interests of ‘selling’ ayahuasca as an exclusively healing remedy. My research also suggests that these attitudes are influenced by current portrayals of Reformation history, whereby accusations of witchcraft are remembered as weapons used against women and spiritual healing practice by the Church. This has contributed to widespread rejection of the concept of witchcraft among the Western

population, especially those who are anti-religious, who as addressed in this dissertation, make up a large proportion of ayahuasca's Western participants. Yet, if you accept it is possible to enact spiritual healing, the logical conclusion, I suggest, is that it also possible to harm spiritually. Ayahuasca's Western clientele have embraced one possibility and largely rejected the other. As represented within my research, immersion in ayahuasca shamanism causes a reconsideration of this stance, and in most cases an acceptance of the existence of 'the dark side' of spirituality as well as 'the light'. Furthermore, my research suggests that the Western aversion to "the dark side" of ayahuasca shamanism can also be considered as a reflection of an aversion to "the dark side" of the Self, which immersion in ayahuasca contexts in Iquitos reveals, must be confronted in the interests of healing.

It is also quite typically argued by Western participants in ayahuasca shamanism that 'the feminine' has been suppressed within Capitalist industrialised and patriarchally organised societies, and that we are currently experiencing an awakening of 'the feminine'. The awakening of 'the feminine' has been related to environmental crisis, sometimes conceptualized within the spiritual counterculture movement as an uprising by 'Mother Earth' (Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Papaspyrou, Baldini & Luke 2019), sentiments which as I have argued, have contributed to the rise of 'Mother Ayahuasca' in Western ayahuasca circles and touristic contexts.

Yet my thesis challenges Westerners' perceptions of 'otherness' in this context, showing rather that these perceptions often reflect their own counter-cultural, eco-feminist inspired concerns, and contains a critique of eco-feminist perspectives, through its presentation of mestizo Amazonian understandings of gender and its dynamic relationship with cosmological dualisms. Furthermore, I propose, this enables a reflection on and interrogation of perceptions of gender differences reflected within Western social systems and movements, which perceive gender as being fixed and furthermore, in relations of superiority and inferiority, as

both Patriarchy and its counter- movements can be seen to convey, showing preference for either ‘male’ or ‘female’ qualities.

Through the modern Western Feminist movement women acquired more freedom to engage in male domains of society and gender differences were downplayed. While the acquisition of these freedoms for women is positive, I suggest that the movement showed preference for ‘masculine’ qualities associated with Culture and Rationality over the ‘feminine’ in Western discourse and culture, associated with Nature and Nurture. Within eco-feminism and ‘third-wave’ feminism we see a reversal of patriarchal constructions of gender that grant superiority to ‘male’ qualities, rather granting superiority to ‘feminine’ qualities. Within ayahuasca shamanism these tendencies can be observed through the commodification of ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ by the ayahuasca industry as a purely benevolent healing entity.

Whereas the positive associations of healing, nature and nurturing love are essentialised as feminine and associated with ‘Mother Ayahuasca’ within Western ayahuasca discourse, and the opposite of masculine associations with warfare and *brujería* implied, according to mestizo Amazonian cosmologies, Nature encompasses both male and female forms with both sides containing light and dark elements, as the practice of ayahuasca shamanism also reflects.

Thus, I propose that Amazonian perspectives of ayahuasca contained within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism, compel us to reassess our essentialist approaches to gender whereby male and female, masculine and feminine, are interpreted as either positive or negative, ‘light’ or ‘dark’, and embrace a re-thinking of gendered dualism as being dynamic and equal, that acknowledges differences between the masculine and feminine, yet recognises the existence of ‘light’ and ‘dark’ elements in both male and female aspects.

Beyond Ambiguity

My thesis has explored how ayahuasca transcends dualistic boundaries of gender and cosmology – male/female, light/dark, religion/spirituality and human/non-human as well as recording and developing understandings of duality through cross-cultural encounters within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos context. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I have also highlighted ambiguities within the practice of mestizo shamanism which enable multiple interpretations of the same event, and within which plural moralities surrounding *brujería* and gender dynamics exist, related to cross-cultural differences and exhibited by different actors in this field. Yet, some aspects of practice fall outside of these ambiguities, according to most Western and mestizo participants in my research: namely, murder and rape.

In Chapter Seven I indicated that some practitioners argue that the only ‘real *brujería*’ is murder. Indeed, murder through *brujería* was considered by all shamanic practitioners among my research participants as morally wrong. Within the context of shamanic warfare and rivalry this is in contrast with spiritual attack between them, which is conceived of by many as acceptable within this context, as the enthusiastic way in which some shamans and apprentices speak about shamanic warfare suggests (Chapter Seven). A Western apprentice explained that among his shamanic group, a predominantly mestizo group of shamans frequently engaged in shamanic battle with other shamans, they have a ‘pact’ that they must never kill. A further example that illustrates this point was the case of a Western apprentice who following the breakdown of his relationship with his *maestro* had been experiencing spiritual attacks from him. When he went to speak with him about this and attempt to mend the relationship, his *maestro* told him that he would never “*physically*” harm him, thus showing that physical harm is considered as crossing a line, in contrast to spiritual harm.

What constitutes sexual abuse within ayahuasca contexts is more contentious amongst different actors in the ayahuasca industry, as addressed in Chapter Eight. However, it is widely acknowledged and disapproved of by both local and Western participants immersed in ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region that some shamans are predators who serially abuse female participants knowingly causing them harm. Furthermore, while the establishment of conceivably consensual sexual relationships between shamans or facilitators and ceremonial participants raise questions around consent and what constitutes abuse due to uneven power dynamics and the use of shamanic seduction techniques in ayahuasca contexts, incidences of rape by brutal force are not ambiguous according to any of my research participants.

However, my research revealed that even these incidences were being allowed to continue due largely to the patriarchal organisation of the ayahuasca industry and related ayahuasca practice in the Iquitos region. As a female researcher in this field, I felt compelled to act.

Researcher – Activist

My role as an anthropologist developed during the research into that of a researcher-activist when I became involved in the *Chacrana*' initiative to combat sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca settings. My decision to partake in this initiative was straightforward having become aware that sexual abuse of female participants in ayahuasca contexts in Iquitos was widespread during my fieldwork, an unwelcome discovery that had been emerging from the very beginning of my time in the field as my early experiences described in the opening chapters of this dissertation portray. Furthermore, I also became aware that sexual abuse of female participants was being covered up by the ayahuasca industry, as argued in the final ethnographic chapter of this dissertation addressing the phenomenon (Chapter Eight).

The roles of researcher and activist are perceived as being at odds with each other by some commentators, such as D'Andrade who argues that 'moral models of anthropology' conflict with objectivity and science (D'Andrade 1995), and critics of critical medical anthropology who argue that there is a contradiction between social activism and valid anthropological research (e.g. Estroff 1988; Wiley 1992). Yet it is also widely accepted within the anthropological discipline that anthropologists should be responsive to how their fieldwork unfolds and indeed, the concerns of their research participants (e.g. Hazan and Hertzog 2011). The direction my research had taken, involving increasing encounters with sexual abuse in the field, followed by an invitation by *Chacruna* to edit Daniela Peluso's article on sexual seduction and attack among shamans and participants in ayahuasca contexts (2014) for their website; here I recognised many similar incidences and patterns within my own research and viewed this as a clear call to action, which indeed then came in the form of an invitation from *Chacruna* to assist with the formation of the *Guidelines for the awareness of sexual Abuse in ayahuasca contexts*' (Chacruna 2019). I had undoubtedly found myself in a position in which inaction would be immoral and indeed, in part, contribute toward the problem, as per the claim, disputably contributed to Bonhoeffer, that "*Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.*" (Bergen in Green and Carter eds. 2013).

As a rebuke to critics of critical medical anthropology Barger and Reza argue that 'it is because of the very value positions involved that the highest scientific standards are needed ... because we have to have valid understandings if our contributions are to be effective and constructive. (1989:276-277). In the case of the *Guidelines*' understanding the ubiquity of sexual abuse and the problems with addressing the problem at the level of perpetrators (legal and structural), meant creating guidelines for participants and focusing on raising awareness of the problem was understood by researcher contributors, including myself, to be a more effective form of intervention with longer-term impacts than addressing individual

perpetrators and cases (although researchers involved have also been engaged in specific efforts of this kind). Anthropological research also revealed the issues with cross-cultural interactions and understandings of gender dynamics and behavioural norms across cultures that needed to be communicated to potential victims, as well as highlighting dissonance between Western understandings of sexual prohibitions and norms of sexual relations within Amazonian culture and shamanism, key observations that could not have been attained without immersive research and experience.

Barger and Reza's work also highlights the importance of occupying an insider's role for successful social action illustrating that 'although the detached observer may gain certain social scientific insights, only the engaged observer is privy to other', and emphasizes the importance of collaboration at community level, a cornerstone of critical praxis (Singer 1995:99). My role as an insider in the Iquitos ayahuasca community greatly contributed to my ability to conduct worthwhile research and to distribute and discuss the *Guidelines* on the ground through trusted community contacts. It is likely that these efforts would have been rejected if they had come from an 'outside' source due to widespread suspicion of 'outsiders' within the ayahuasca community there, as the case of the ESC (Ethnobotanical Stewardship Council) being ousted is testament to. On the other hand, the ASA (Ayahuasca Safety Association), an insider organisation, perhaps resisted addressing sexual abuse further, and *brujería* at all, due to their insider position, with the board made up of stakeholders in the industry who for commercial reasons had issues with bringing attention to these 'darker' elements of practice, especially considering they formed in resistance to supposed efforts by the Peruvian government to shut down ayahuasca tourism. Thus, my position as both insider and outsider - as an immersed participant and researcher attached to an outsider organisation - provided the appropriate stance from which to comment and act on these issues.

Doctor-patient relationships and the power dynamics within them are a key focus for critical medical anthropology (e.g. Kleinman 1978; Jackson 1992; Pappas 1990). My research offers a cross-cultural perspective through its appraisal of shaman/patient relations and the power dynamics involved. My work questions the similarities between doctor-patient and shaman/patient relations through cross-cultural and cultural relativist analysis addressing the problems that arise within ayahuasca industry contexts involving cross-cultural participation and disagreements between various actors about proper codes of conduct in this setting. Scheper-Hughes (1992, 1995) has suggested that ‘cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live and that anthropology, if it is to be worth any- thing at all, must be ethically grounded’ (1995:410). I do not see cultural/moral relativism and ethically grounded anthropology as mutually exclusive: my work is both culturally relative, highlighting plural moralities in the context of sexual relations and abuse in ayahuasca settings, and activist in attempting to combat sexual abuse occurrences through the *Chacruna Guidelines*’ and my analysis of the issues of sexual seduction and attack in this dissertation.

Scheper-Hughes indicates how the insistence and injustice felt by her anthropological subjects for her apparent inaction as an anthropologist is what led to her more activist ‘militant’ stance (Scheper-Hughes 1993: 410). This is to some extent applicable to my own experience in which the plight of female participants experiencing sexual abuse at the hands of shamans and facilitators led me to act on this issue. However, my research participants had varying perspectives of the issues and practices involved in mestizo ayahuasca shamanism and indeed what purpose my work should serve, or how it might serve them. For instance, many Westerners in my research assumed my work should defend ayahuasca and prove its healing capabilities while mestizo shamans emphasized the need to portray their practices also in a positive light. I perhaps go against some of their wishes therefore by discussing

brujería and sexual abuse and the extent to which they feature within mestizo ayahuasca shamanism in the ayahuasca industry. I believe as anthropologists a certain level of autonomy over how our research findings are presented and used is integral. My work is intended to portray the ayahuasca industry in Iquitos from a neutral stance in a manner that represents my research participants and their varying perspectives accurately and respectfully.

As described by Singer, 'Critical medical anthropology is predicated on the awareness that "no anthropologist can escape involvement" (Hastrup and Elsass 1990:302) and is characterized by its abiding concern with the question: involvement in whose interest?' (Singer 1995: 98). My research was conducted in the interests of both Western and mestizo participants and actors in ayahuasca shamanism in the Iquitos region. My efforts throughout this thesis to dismantle the myth of "Mother Ayahuasca" have been conducted in the interest of more accurately representing local mestizos' practice and their related beliefs and cosmology. Furthermore, they have been conducted in the interest of bringing awareness to sexual abuse and *brujería* in an effort to increase Western participant safety, but also, in relation to developing understandings of *brujería* and healing, to encourage confrontation with darker elements of one's internal world as my experience has shown me that this is an integral component of healing for the individual.

The commodification of 'Mother Ayahuasca' as a purely benevolent and furthermore, omnipotent being in which participants are encouraged to place total trust, as described in Chapter Five, has created a situation in which ceremonial participants are rendered unprepared for negative potentialities and specifically, I argue, unaware of the importance and ambiguity of shamanic agency related to these potentialities. I propose that romanticisation of ayahuasca as a purely healing remedy and of shamanic practitioners exclusively as healers by the commercial industry obscures darker potentialities leaving Western ceremonial and retreat participants more open to shamanic and sexual attack.

A theme that arose throughout my research and emerged across several layers of my analysis of ayahuasca shamanism is that the suppression of ‘darkness’ leads to its amplification. This was indicated in relation to *brujería*, sexual abuse occurrences, and at the level of the individual psyche in the context of healing - as within Western practitioners’ interpretations of healing within *brujería* frameworks. According to some insider perspectives, the more suppressed dark aspects of the soul become, the more dominant and influential they are on the individual psyche.

This is not dissimilar to how *brujería* might be perceived at the social level in that, as suggested in Chapter Seven, the eclipsing of *brujería* for the Western audience by the ayahuasca industry is connected with its exacerbation. The covering up of sexual abuse by actors in the commercial ayahuasca industry can also be seen to have contributed to occurrences. As this dissertation reflects, knowledge of *brujería* and knowledge of sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts is now becoming more widespread. This process seems essential for the development of greater awareness of and therefore protection against these aspects of practice. Furthermore, my analysis of novel interpretations of healing within *brujería* frameworks indicates the importance of confronting ‘dark’ aspects of the Self. Thus, I propose that the myth of “Mother Ayahuasca” represents a romanticised conception of healing that is a barrier to its fruition. Perhaps most pertinently, this thesis was written with the purpose of dismantling that barrier.

Avenues for Future Research

My research presents various avenues for further study.

The contemporary manifestation of shamanic warfare related to *brujería* and sexual abuse occurrences within global ayahuasca networks is of great anthropological interest and public relevance. Further research on the role of *brujería* in the context of shamanic retreats and

commercial settings as a way to acquire power, wealth and women, covering diverse cultural contexts, would be worthwhile.

Research in all female healing environments addressing social dynamics related to the dynamics of healing would also be of interest and benefit. This could be conducted in local Shipibo and Westernized contexts as well as other all - female ayahuasca contexts among groups within ayahuasca church communities in Brazil for example. Research aimed at assessing the methods used to combat sexual abuse across diverse ayahuasca communities and their utility may also be of benefit.

Further research in to ayahuasca's usage within Amazonian 'love magic', practices which as I have indicated are widespread in the local context and are impacting upon touristic contexts also, deserves greater scholarly attention. Romantic and sexual relationships between shamans and spiritual partners (Peluso 2014; this dissertation) are an underexplored phenomenon within Amazonian shamanism that could also be investigated further.

My research participants described the spirit of ayahuasca and other plant spirits as having both male and female aspects, capable of manifesting in either form, with one aspect sometimes considered more dominant. However, my post fieldwork enquiries revealed that the potential for plant spirits and other spirits to manifest in androgynous form was also considered possible by some mestizo *ayahuasqueros* and *vegetalistas*, although this was not a phenomenon for which my fieldwork provided research evidence, and which might warrant further exploration. Following the rise of "Mother Ayahuasca" with third-wave Feminism, we might predict the emergence of a 'gender neutral' ayahuasca spirit in the current social climate.

A point of interest this dissertation raises is how 'the feminine' and 'the masculine' are characterized by participants in the field of ayahuasca shamanism. Among my research

participants the masculine was usually associated with light, direction, order, protective energy and conversely aggression and defensiveness, whereas the feminine was typically associated with emotion, fluidity, nurture, creativity, sensuality and sexuality, and conversely possessiveness and destructivity. These depictions are by no means fixed representations of the masculine and feminine or unanimously agreed upon. More simply, the masculine principle may be conceptualised as active while the feminine principle may be conceptualised as receptive. My research suggests that understandings of feminine and masculine aspects within human beings as well as plant beings are in the process of being formulated by some participants in the field of ayahuasca shamanism, as in wider healing orientated communities. More focused research on this issue in ayahuasca contexts including comparative research across mestizo, indigenous Amazonian and Westernized contexts, and including an interrogation of the impacts of ayahuasca experiences on participants' interpretations of 'the masculine' and 'the feminine' could provide valuable insights.

While my research emphasizes the interconnectedness between *curanderismo* and *brujería*, it also revealed discrepancies between the views of some experienced practitioners regarding the connection between healing and *brujería*, with some retaining traditional views and others arguing that healing can be conducted without any recourse to *brujería* practice. This possibility may reveal differences of interpretation or may point to developments of practice. Further research with mestizo and Western practitioners could help to further clarify this point of contention between practitioners, which is of great interest and consequence in the field.

While the focus of this dissertation is on dualities of gender and cosmology, it also engages with the concepts of Nature and Culture, typically considered opposing (usually gendered) domains within Western mind-sets. My research indicates tensions and differences between Western and mestizo perspectives of and engagement with this 'duality' within the ayahuasca

industry and presents various examples from mestizo research participants that suggest that Nature/Culture are not opposing concepts within mestizo Amazonian perspectives. Nature is conceived of as containing both male and female aspects while Culture is presented as closely connected with the body and blood, for example. This topic has wide scope and would benefit from further study.

My research records novel approaches to mental health challenges and healing that have emerged within this context, which I suggest have relevance and utility beyond this domain and deserve further scholarly attention. Research in to approaches to mental health problems in ayahuasca contexts and the longer-term impacts of these approaches as well as research addressing multiple interpretations of mental health issues across ayahuasca contexts could be of great value in the current climate of a ‘mental health crisis’ in Western societies.

Overall, my dissertation makes contributions in social and medical anthropology as well as ayahuasca, gender and Lowland South American studies.

Appendices

Appendix A: Retreat Questionnaire

Ayahuasca Retreat Participant Questionnaire

Thank you for choosing to do an ayahuasca retreat with us. We look forward to welcoming you to our Amazonian Lodge and will send you more detailed information about your retreat in due course.

Please answer the following questions to help us to get to know you a little before you arrive. This is to ensure your health and safety and help us to guide you through your retreat, as well as to help you to explore your intentions before your ayahuasca journey begins!

Basic Personal Details

Name:

Sex:

Nationality:

Age:

Contact details (email or other):

Interest

1. Please tell us why you are interested in doing an ayahuasca retreat? (We encourage you to come to your retreat with an intention but also believe that sometimes the medicine calls us before we know why! This process should help you to become more aware of your intentions.)

2. Do you have specific problems you would like to work on or explore during your retreat? (this may include relationships, addictive behaviour, life trauma, depression/anxiety etc.)

3. Is this your first experience with ayahuasca? If not, how many times (approx.) have you drunk ayahuasca? Please could you tell us a little about your previous experiences.

4. Do you have any questions for us about ayahuasca healing?

Health & Safety

*Ayahuasca is not safe for people using some medications for conditions such as AIDS, depression and heart problems. If this applies to you, you may still be able to go ahead with ayahuasca healing if you are able to stop taking medication. We will discuss this with you further to ensure ayahuasca is safe for you. It is important that you answer the following questions honestly. We can accommodate most people when proper precautions are followed .

1. Have you been diagnosed with any medical conditions? (including physical diseases, mental illness, heart conditions, chronic pain, diabetes etc.) Please list and explain experience of illness and how you have been coping.

2. Have you suffered from any serious diseases or medical conditions in the past? If so, please elaborate.

3. Have you ever had psychotic episodes? Please elaborate if so.

4. Do you have any STDs/STIs? It is widely believed that ayahuasca and other medicinal plants (as used in our ayahuasca brew and plant *dietas*) can be used to treat STDs/STIs, although further research is needed in this field.

5. Do you have any disabilities? If so please state which and whether you require any extra support or assistance during your stay with us.

6. Have you had any major operations during your lifetime? If so, please elaborate.

7. Do you take any regular pharmaceutical/ prescription medication? If so please list with explanation for treatment.

8. Do you currently use any other "drugs", including chemical street drugs, psychedelics, narcotics, alcohol, cannabis etc? If so, please elaborate on your usage (how regular, medicinal?, recreational? etc.) and experiences if you wish.

9. Which "drugs" have you used in the past. Please list and elaborate on usage and experiences if you wish. We are especially interested in knowing about previous psychedelic experiences and addictions you may have overcome.

10. Are you pregnant? If so, how many weeks/months? How have you been experiencing your pregnancy?

11. Do you have any other health related issues we should know about? including undiagnosed illnesses, allergies etc.

12. Do you have any questions about health and safety issues for us?

About Your Ayahuasca Retreat

Please answer these questions to help us plan your retreat.

1. Do you have any dietary requirements (vegetarian, celiac etc.)?

2. Our diet is simple and traditional and mainly includes the following: rice, fish (usually served whole including head), platano, yukka, lentils, beans, eggs. Please let us know if you have any issues with this.

3. Would you prefer to stay in individual or shared accommodation? (all our accommodation is in shared bungalows with double or single room options)

4. There are two travel options to the centre from Iquitos. You can either take an overnight *lancha* (longboat - 12 - 14hours) in hammocks as included in the price of the retreat, or a *rapido* (coach and speedboat - 4 hours) costing 80 soles. Which would you prefer?

5. Do you have any skills you would like to share with us and/or your fellow *ayahuasceros* during your retreat?! (such as yoga, meditation, reiki, art classes)

6. Do you have any further requirements, thoughts or questions about your retreat ?

Appendix B: Raw Retreat Questionnaire Data

G e n d e r	A g e	N a t i o n a l i t y	F i r s t t i m e ?	M o t i v a t i o n (G e n e r a l)	P h y s i c a l A i l m e n t s	M e n t a l H e a l t h I s s u e s	M e d i c a t i o n	P r e v i o u s D r u g/ P s y c h U s e
M a l e	3 3	G e r m a n	Yes	life purpose direction	Lower back pain	addiction	none	alcoh ol
				deeper understandin g of being.	psoriasis	eating disorder		canna bis
				getting closer to my feelings/fema les side of me	myopia on one eye	trauma		cocai ne
				raising consciousnes s	shivering hands	depressi on		Ecsta cy
					overweight (past)			Keta mine
								MDM A
								Mush rooms
								Salvia
F e m a l e	3 0	U. S	Yes	life purpose direction	None	lack of self disciplin e	none	Mush rooms
				understandin g higher calling		lack of Self-love		
F e m a l e	2 9	U. S	Yes	physical healing	Chronic pain (muscles and joints)	Self- sabotage	Gabapentin (2, 600mg pills 3x per day) for pain and headache prevention	canna bis
				life purpose direction	Chronic fatigue	Food addiction (weight control)	Omeprazole (1, 20 mg pill per day) for acid reflux and ibs	mushr ooms
					Muscle tension (mostly in shoulders,	Procrasti nation	Cetirizine HCL (1, 10mg pill per day) for allergies	

					neck, and head)			
					Migraines	Laziness	Cyclobenzaprine HCL (2, 5mg pills per day) for muscle tension and pain	
					IBS/Acid Reflux (Digestive problems)	Fear of death		
					Allergies (mostly environmental)	Lack of ability to "shut off" my mind		
					Eczema (skin rash)	sleeping problems		
Male	20	Finish	Yes	consciousness exploration		self-esteem issues	10 mg Adderall 2- 5 x per week	alcohol
				personal healing		ADD (mild)		cannabis
				life purpose direction				cocaine
				relationship help (father)				DMT
				heal grief from death of friends				LSD
								mushrooms
								tobacco
Female	34	U.S	Yes	responding to calling from ayahuasca		fear	None	alcohol
				working on relationship		overdrinking and smoking		cannabis
				accepting and dealing with 3 miscarriages				cocaine
							None	ecstasy

								mushrooms
Male	40	Hungarian	Yes	assimilate my Shadow in the jungian meaning		self mirroring	None	alcohol
				desire to reconnect with self		automatic behaviour		cannabis
				mid life crisis				cocaine
								LSD
								Salvia
Male	32	Polish	Yes	responding to calling from ayahuasca				cannabis
				life purpose direction	hay fever			
					torn Achilles tendon			
					excessive sweating		None	
Female	52	U.S	Yes	healing depression and anxiety	Hodgkin's Lymphoma, Stage 2 in remission	depression	None	alcohol
				healing dormant cancer cells				cannabis (few times, dislikes)
				regaining spiritual gifts				cocaine
				inner guidance				LSD
				healing sadness over broken marriage				mescaline
Male	51	Canadian	Yes	desire to connect with alternate reality	Hypothyroidism		Synthroid daily	cannabis

					Herpes (oral)		THC 1mg/day since 2014	MDM A
					HPV			Tobacco
Female	45	Canadian	Yes	becoming present	gestational diabetics (past)	postnatal depression (past)	None	alcohol
				purging anger/resentment				cannabis
				lose weight				
				relationship help (spouse)				
Female	54	Canadian	Yes	To gain energy and knowledge	IBS	ADHD	Aderall	cannabis
				relationship help (children)			Cannabis dry and oil once/day	cocaine
								ecstasy
Male	27	U.S.	Yes	consciousness exploration	HPV			alcohol
				following the signs				cannabis
				developing relationship with plants and ancient knowledge				psilocybin
								Salvia
Female	22	U.S.	Yes	healing anxiety and depression	ulcerative colitis	depression	Lialda 1.2 mg 2x daily – anti-inflammatory for ulcerative colitis	alcohol
				physical healing for ulcerative colitis		anxiety	Canasa 1000 mg suppositories 1x daily – anti-inflammatory for ulcerative colitis	cannabis
				healing life trauma		PTSD	Bentyl 20 mg 3x daily – anti-	

							spasmodic for ulcerative colitis	
						Panic disorder	Pamelor 75 mg 1x daily – anti-depressant	
							Klonopin 1mg 2x daily – anti-anxiety	
							Birth Control	
Male	32	Indian	no - 3 times before	to reconnect with God, nature, and my true highest self	None	low self-esteem	None	alcohol
				healing from PTSD related to drug abuse		PTSD		cannabis
				consciousness raising		guilt and shame		cocaine
				enlightenment		anxiety		LSD
						paranoia		Magic mushrooms
								salvia
Male	30	Canadian	Yes	curiosity			none	cannabis
				self understanding				cocaine
				relationship help (romantic)				LSD
								Magic mushrooms
								MDMA
								San Pedro
Male	30	British	Yes	curiosity		anxiety	none	alcohol
				spiritual interest				cannabis
				life purpose direction				cocaine

								Ecstasy
								MDMA
								Magic mushrooms
Male	53	British	Yes	healing depression/anxiety		dysthymia	SSRIs (previous) fluoxetine	alcohol
				healing addiction				LSD
								Magic mushrooms
Male	36	U.S.	Yes	healing mental and emotional issues	sinus problems	depression	anti anxiety medication	alcohol
				physical healing	HSV	anxiety	ambient - sleeping pill	cannabis
				overcoming blockages	minor joint pain		kratom	LSD
				life purpose direction				Magic mushrooms
								MDMA
Male	30	British	YES	spiritual exploration			None	cannabis
Male	34	U.S.	no - 5 ceremonies	spiritual growth		PTSD	cannabis	alcohol
				improve relationship with self		anxiety		cannabis
								cocaine
								LSD
								Magic mushrooms
Male	32	Italian	Yes	life purpose direction		depression	medication to prevent hair fall	alcohol

				interest in shamanic path		anxiety	SSRI and SNRI previously	cannabis
				healing depression				cocaine
								Magic mushrooms
								salvia
Male	61	US	YES	life purpose direction	cancer survivor	depression		cannabis
				healing depression	chronic joint and muscle pain			LSD
					type 2 diabetes (previous)			
					high blood pressure (cured)			
Female	34	US	YES	healing emotional trauma		depression	SSRIs previously	cannabis
				spiritual enlightenment				Magic mushrooms
				relationship improvement				
Female	31	German	YES	responding to calling from ayahuasca		depression		cannabis
				life purpose direction		anxiety		
				uncovering trauma from childhood		panic attack		
Male	40	Welsh	Yes	curiosity			None	alcohol
				healing stress and anxiety				cannabis
								cocaine

								LSD
								magic mushrooms
Male	44	Australian	Yes	consciousness exploration	Herpes (type I & II)	depression	None	amphetamine
				emotional healing	presbyopia - poor reading vision	anxiety		cannabis
				life purpose direction	underweight	sugar addiction		cocaine
						disconnection from life		DMT
								Ecstasy
								lsd
								magic mushrooms
								MDMA
Female	19	U.S.	Once previously	desire to reconnect with universe and self			None	alcohol
				relationship help				cannabis
								LSD
								magic mushrooms
Male	28	U.S.	Approx. 6 times	life purpose direction			None	alcohol
				relationship help (girlfriend)				cannabis
				emotional healing				cocaine
								Heroin
								iboga
								ketamine

								LSD
								MDMA
								psychedelics synthetic
Female	40	U.S	YES	emotional healing	ulcerative colitis	depression	buprenorphine previously	alcohol
				physical healing		anxiety		cannabis
				weight loss		self-doubt		cocaine
				healing addictions		addiction		ecstasy
				healing trauma		ADHD		LSD
				life purpose direction - access spirit guides				magic mushrooms
				access shamanic healing potential				methamphetamine
								San Pedro
Female	34	Germany	Yes	consciousness exploration/understanding	gum inflammation			Alcohol
				spiritual exploration/understanding	HPV			LSD
				physical healing				Tobacco
Male	28	Croatian	Yes	to know more about self			None	alcohol
								cannabis
								4Aco DMT

								Ecstasy
								LSD
								magic mushrooms
								MDMA
Male	26	Malaysian	Yes	disillusion with society	weak heart? Undiagnosed	heartbreak / loneliness	None	Benzodiazepines
				ego work				XTC (like MDMA)
				healing anxiety				
				relationship help				
				self-realisation				
Male	22	U.S	Yes	life purpose direction			none	alcohol
				curiosity				cannabis
				jungle adventure				LSD
				emotional healing				MDMA
				disillusion with society				
Female	50	Romanian	yes	emotional healing		anxiety	none - antidepressants previously	alcohol
								cannabis
Male	30	U.S	YES	desire to connect with spirit			none	alcohol
				desire to connect with self and universe				cannabis
								cocaine

								magic mushrooms
								MDMA
Male	34	U.S./Cameroon	yes	life purpose direction			none	alcohol
				healing trauma				cannabis
				healing negativity and depression				
				healing addiction/self-destructive habits				
female	30	British	yes - DMT previous	reconnection with nature and the universe		anxiety	none	alcohol
				relationship help				cannabis
				healing anxiety				cocaine
								DMT
								ketamine
								LSD
								MDMA
								2cb
female	20	U.S.	yes	responding to calling from ayahuasca		anxiety	Lamictal (a mood stabilizer) previously	alcohol
				emotional healing		depression	Propranolol for panic attacks	cannabis
				healing trauma		PTSD		psychedelics

				relationship help		OCD		
Male	27	U.S	yes	healing depression				
				healing addiction				
				improving understanding of existence/reality			none	alcohol
								cannabis
Male	born 1980s	U.S	YES	I feel like a liability for the world.		ADHD	Amphetamine/dex-amph for ADHD	alcohol
				improving understanding of existence/reality				cannabis
								ecstasy
Male	27	U.S	YES	Life purpose direction			none	alcohol
				desire for connection with universe				cannabis
				self-understanding				cocaine
				relationship help				DMT
								Ketamine
								LSD
								Magic mushrooms
								salvia
Male	42	Roma	yes	healing depression/anxiety		depression	antidepressant mild previously	cannabis

		nia n						
						anxiety		cocai ne
								magic mushr ooms
								salvia
								speed
m al e	2 6	Bri tis h	yes	spiritual curiosity		depressi on previousl y	none	alcoh ol
				healing depression (previous)				amph etami nes
				healing anger				canna bis
								cocai ne
								ketam ine
								LSD
								Magic mushr ooms
								salvia
								2cb
								2ci
m al e	3 0	Bri tis h	10-13 times previ ous	spiritual exploration		mild Asperger 's	none	canna bis
				healing trauma				MDM A
				removal negative energy				Electr onic nicoti ne cigare tte
				healing mild Asperger's				syrian rue
								tobac co
m al e	4 5	Bri tis h	yes	spiritual quest			none	alcoh ol

				healing addiction				cannabis
				curiosity for female partner				DMT
								Magic mushrooms
female	33	U.S	6 times previously	desire to follow shamanic path			none	alcohol
				healing				cannabis
								cocaine
								ecstasy
								iboga
								Ketamine
								LSD
								Meth
female	28	U.S	yes	facilitate change in perspective			none	alcohol
								cannabis
								Magic mushrooms
female	45	U.S	3 ceremonies previously	healing genetic, degenerative sensory-neural hearing loss	genetic, degenerative sensory-neural hearing loss		none	alcohol
								San Pedro
male	29	Ireland	yes	healing grief (mother)			Antihistamines	Alcohol
				desire for peace of mind				cannabis

				healing addiction				cocaine
								LSD
								magic mushrooms
male	38	Canadian	yes	healing depression		depression	none	alcohol
				healing addiction				LSD
				relationship help				magic mushrooms
								many varieties
male	24	U.S.	yes	healing addiction	chronic abdominal pain	depression	none	alcohol
				healing trauma		anxiety		cannabis
				healing depression and anxiety		recovering heroin addict		cocaine
				disillusionment with conventional western medicine				heroin
								LSD
								ketamine
								magic mushrooms
								opiates
female	28	Canadian	yes	life purpose direction			none	alcohol
				spiritual exploration				cannabis

				curiosity				magic mushrooms
				assistance with personal growth and transition				
male	24	Italian	yes	to connect with self			none	alcohol
				relationship help				cannabis
								cocaine
								Ketamine
								LSD
male	30	Canadian	yes	spiritual exploration		gifted	none	alcohol
				life purpose direction				cannabis
				healing social anxiety				cocaine
				improving understanding of reality				LSD
								Speed
male	33	U.S.	yes	self-understanding			Atovaquone daily for malaria	alcohol
				life purpose direction			Azithromycin (antibiotics) every other day for acne	cannabis
								cocaine
								heroin
								magic mushrooms
female	36	U.S.	Yes	emotional healing			none	alcohol

				life purpose direction				canna bis
				spiritual exploration				cocai ne
								crack
								magic mushr ooms
f e m a l e	2 8	Au str ali an	yes	spiritual exploration		anxiety	none	DMT
				personal growth				LSD
				emotional healing				MDM A
m a l e	2 2	un kn own	yes	interest in indigenous cultures			none	alcoh ol
				healing trauma and grief (father suicide)				canna bis
								LSD
								magic mushr ooms
								MDM A
m a l e	2 2	Au str ali an	yes	consciousnes s exploration			none	alcoh ol
				life purpose direction				canna bis
				self - understandin g				DMT
				healing				LSD
								MDM A
M a l e	2 6	Ge rm an	yes	desire to connect with self		depressi on	none	alcoh ol
				overcoming fear				canna bis

								ecstasy
male	38	U.S.	20 times approx.	spiritual growth			none	
male	44	Indian	yes	physical healing (eczema)	eczema	addiction	none	alcohol
				healing addiction	sleep paralysis (previous)			cannabis
				emotional healing (clearing blockages)				LSD
								Psilocybin
male	37	U.S.	yes	life purpose direction			Adderall	DMT
				desire to connect with nature and universe				GHB
				healing relationship between humans and animals				Ketamine
								LSD
								magic mushrooms
								MDMA
								2cb
								5Meo-DIPT
femal e	34	Italian	7 ceremonies previously	personal growth			none	alcohol
								cannabis
								LSD

								magic mushrooms
male	35	Canadian	yes	personal growth			none	cannabis
				healing addiction				LSD
				spiritual exploration				Psilocybin
male	49	Australian	yes	curiosity	muscle cramps		magnesium (muscle cramps)	tobacco
				cultural interest				party drugs
				self-understanding				
female	22	U.S.	yes	responding to calling		depression - cyclothymic disorder	Lamictol (lamotrigine) 400mg a day - stopped 1 week previous	alcohol
				healing trauma				cannabis
				healing stress				kamboo
				healing depression				tobacco
female	42	U.S.	yes	emotional healing	herpes	depression		cannabis
				healing trauma (sexual)				cocaine
				to clean aura / karmic energy				
male	31	German	yes	life purpose direction				
				improve understanding of		depression (previous)	none	alcohol

				existence/reality				
								cannabis
								cocaine
								LSD
								magic mushrooms
								MDMA
male	22	Canadian	yes	life purpose direction			none	alcohol
				improve understanding of existence/reality				cannabis
				personal growth				cocaine
				spiritual exploration				LSD
				relationship help				MDMA
				emotional healing				psilocybin
male	37	Latvian	yes	consciousness expansion	keratoconus and transplanted cornea		none	none
				relationship help	benign tumour thyroid			
				improve concentration / focus				
male	22	Canadian	yes	emotional healing	leg rash	depression (previous)	tropical ointment twice/day for leg rash	alcohol
				life purpose direction				cannabis
				relationship help				cocaine
								LSD

								mushrooms
								MDMA
f e m a l e	3 2	U. S	yes	personal growth	Fibromyalgia - chronic pain	anxiety	adderall (previous)	cannabis
				emotional healing		depression		LSD
				overcoming fear		ADHD		san pedro
				relationship help				
f e m a l e	2 5	Ca na dia n	yes	life purpose direction	IBS	anxiety	none	alcohol
				self - understanding				cannabis
				healing addiction				cocaine
				healing trauma				ecstasy
				healing anxiety				LSD
								MDMA
								Psilocybin
								speed
m a l e	2 3	Br i t i s h	yes	curiosity	zinc deficiency		zinc supplements	cannabis
				spiritual exploration				cocaine
				self - understanding				DMT
								ecstasy
								ketamine
								LSD

								magic mushrooms
								MDM A
								2CB
								2Ci
								San Pedro
f e m a l e	3 8	US A/ Ru ssi a	yes	spiritual exploration			none	GHB
				animal exploration				magic mushrooms
				personal growth				MDM A
								2CB
m a l e	3 4	U. S	YES	healing addiction		addiction (alcohol)	none	alcohol
								canna bis
								cocai ne
m a l e	2 9	U. S	yes	life purpose direction	none	none	none	alcohol
				relationship help				canna bis
				consciousness exploration				cocai ne
				spiritual exploration				mgic mushr ooms
				ayahuasca calling				
								magic mushr ooms
m a l e	3 8	Bri tis h	No - retrea t BM 2 yrs ago	further my interest in the work of plant medicines			none	canna bis
				further the work of				cocai ne

				bettering myself				
								Ecstasy
								LSD
								MDMA
male	20	British	yes	curiosity - heard about ayahuasca whilst travelling Peru		depression and severe anxiety (previously)	none - antidepressants previously	alcohol
				help with anxiety and paranoia				cannabis
								cocaine
								ketamine
								MDMA
								"mystery lines"
female	31	Colombian	no - ceremonies	to meet me and know more about universe				cannabis
				to meet mother Ayahuasca				
				to connect more with myself				
male	29	British	yes	to improve relationships	re-curring stress related shingles			alcohol
				to become more emotionally engaged				cannabis
				interest in plant medicine and connection to nature				cocaine

				guilt and grief healing				ketamine
				help with anxiety about insignificance of Earth				MDMA
Female	31	British	yes	existential questions				magic mushrooms
				release emotional trauma				valium
				to connect more with myself	fibromyalgia	anxiety	none	alcohol
						depression		cannabis
								cocaine
								ecstasy
								speed
female	59	British	yes	emotional healing		depression	tibione for menopause	alcohol
				trauma healing				cannabis
female	30s	U.S	Yes	connection with environment	hypothyroidism		thyroid hormones	alcohol
				renewed perspective clarity				ecstasy
								LSD
male	27	British	yes	spiritual guidance				2CB
				help with procrastination				LSD
								Mushrooms

								MDM A
f e m a l e	2 4	Ge rm an	yes	consciousness expansion		addiction - sugar		alcohol
				to connect with myself				canna bis
				connection with nature				
				connection with intuition				
				healing addiction to sugar				
f e m a l e	3 8	U. S. A	YES	existential questions			none	alcohol
				to connect with myself				canna bis
				connection (self, others, universe)				ecstac y
				healing trauma				mushr ooms
f e m a l e	3 0	Bri tis h	yes	emotional healing	benign pineal gland cyst	anxiety	not now but previously (uses natural alternative practices now)	alcohol
				spiritual exploration	alopecia	depressi on		"recre ationa l drugs "
				existential questions	pernicious anemia			
				healing depression and anxiety	fibromyalgi a			
				healing physically	IBS			
					Psoriasis			
m a l e	4 3	U. S / Ru	no - 5 times previ	more work on		mild depressi	none	alcohol

		ssi a	ous (Gaia)	destructive behaviour		on and anxiety		
				improve relationships (family)				canna bis
m al e	2 9	U. S	YES	life purpose direction	none	none	none	alcoh ol
				relationship help				canna bis
				ayahuasca calling				cocai ne
				spiritual exploration				ISD
				consciousnes s expansion				
f e m al e	2 8	Ge rm an y	yes	improve relationships	circulatory problems	eating disorder	none	Alcoh ol
				to connect with myself	low bloody pressure			canna bis
				help deciding how and where to live				mushr ooms
				connection with body and earth				
f e m al e	2 4	U K	YES	healing trauma	none	eating disorder (previou s)	none	alcoh ol
				life purpose direction				canna bis
				spiritual curiosity				cocai ne
								ecstac y
								ketam ine
								LSD
								MDM A
								mushr ooms
								2CB

m a l e	4 3	U K	no - few times previ ous	cleansing physical and spiritual	none	depressi on (previou s)	none	alcoh ol
				reconnection to self and the universe				canna bis
				reconnection to ayahuasca				cocai ne
				reminder of spiritual insights				ecstac y
								ketam ine
								LSD
								MDM A
								mushr ooms
m a l e	4 1	Fin lan d	yes	work on issues	none	none	Cetirizine antihistamine allergy medication	alcoh ol
				guidance about what should/shoul dn't do				canna bis
				spiritual exploration				cocai ne
								LSD
								mushr ooms
m a l e	3 7	Fin lan d	yes	life purpose direction	none	none	none	alcoh ol
				healing relationships				canna bis
								cocai ne
								LSD
								Mush rooms
m a l e	4 0	U K	no - 4 cere moni es previ ous	spiritual development	none	none	none	alcoh ol

								canna bis
								cocai ne
								ecstas y
								LSD
								mushr ooms
f e m a l e	3 6	US	No - cere moni es U.S	personal transformatio n	none	anxiety	SSRIs previously	alcoh ol
				healing anxiety and depression		depressi on		canna bis
				to learn about ayahuasca tradition				mushr ooms
				healing trauma				
m a l e	2 8	Bel giu m	yes	life purpose direction	none	depressi on	none	alcoh ol
				healing depression				canna bis
				healing family karma				cocai ne
								DMT
								LSD
								Mush rooms
								MDM A
								Opiu m
								san pedro
m a l e	2 8	U. S	Yes	frustration with life and desire to change	none	depressi on	none	alcoh ol
				healing depression		addiction		canna bis
				healing addiction				Mush rooms

f e m a l e	2 8	U. K	Yes	curiosity	none	none	none	alcoh ol
				self - exploration				canna bis
								cocai ne
								LSD
								ketam ine
								mushr ooms

Appendix C: The Chacruna Institute' Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse

Abuse is never your fault. If anything happens, speak up, reach out!

Sexual abuse and misconduct towards female participants in ayahuasca circles are, unfortunately, quite prevalent. Exact numbers are difficult to obtain, as most cases never come to light; nonetheless, the issue is common knowledge within the ayahuasca community. As an organization dedicated to providing public education and cultural understanding about plant medicines, we at the Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines do not wish to dissuade women from drinking ayahuasca, but rather to raise awareness about sexual harassment, and offer practical guidelines in the interest of keeping female participants in ayahuasca ceremonies and communities safe. While our guide is aimed toward preventing female participant abuse by male shamans, where the most commonplace abuses have occurred, we also acknowledge that abuse happens by and toward other genders. This guide embraces a culturally-sensitive approach toward raising awareness and the avoidance of abuse in typical scenarios without diminishing the fact that abuse is unlawful and unacceptable in all circumstances.

Why Does Sexual Assault Occur in Ayahuasca Healing Contexts?

Sexual assault in ayahuasca settings involves a wide spectrum of abuse, including invasive touching, “consensual” sex between healer and participant, and rape. The abuse of participants by healers and facilitators in ayahuasca ceremonial contexts, like any sexual assault, is an abuse of power. It is a gross perversion of the healer-participant dynamic, in which the healer or facilitator uses their position of power and responsibility to gratify personal sexual and power interests. This is especially harmful and shocking considering many women who drink ayahuasca are seeking healing for sexual traumas suffered in the past. Sexual relations between healer and patient or religious leader and follower are an obvious violation of healer-patient and religious codes of conduct. The globalization of ayahuasca presents complex cross-cultural interactions where local and global moral codes and gender relational norms often come into contact and conflict, further complicating healer-patient and religious leader-follower relations. Many Western people now partake of ayahuasca ceremonies in South American contexts where mutual misconceptions of the “other” are commonplace. For instance, “shamans” are often highly romanticized in the Western imagination as being perfect beings or god-like. Some South American, and indeed Western, men have learned to take advantage of some of these exalted images of healers. Equally unjustly, local men may view Western women as sexually promiscuous. Economic inequalities and incentives further complicate these cross-cultural interactions whereby local healers may attempt to improve their financial prospects and social standing through entering into relations with Western women. This is especially prevalent in the current context of the commercialization of ayahuasca. Yet, these cross-cultural considerations

cannot fully explain sexual abuse in ayahuasca contexts, since South American women are also sexually abused by South American healers, and Western women by Western healers.

Sexual abuse between healer and patient is evident in spiritual and healing communities across cultures and throughout time. As in these wider contexts, many shamans or religious leaders claim to possess special powers that can heal others; some might promote “tantric” exercises and sexual contact that they claim can heal someone from past traumatic experiences. They may argue that this will be a way to “regain the sacred energy of sex,” and that “society is moralistic and does not understand the freedom of sex,” etc., in order to gain sexual favors. Instances of so-called “consensual” sex between healer and patient and religious leader and follower often involve great power imbalances and intentional deception and manipulation on the part of the healer. The establishment of allegedly consensual relationships poses several challenges.

Chacruna recognizes that there are many healers, religious leaders, and facilitators working with ayahuasca with great integrity. Being aware of potentially relevant contexts in which misconduct has taken place allows us to make informed choices. All individuals have their own bodily autonomy and the right to make their own choices. All individuals have the right to say “no” to any situation they are not comfortable with, and the right to withdraw themselves from any situation that they are not comfortable in. Here, we offer for your consideration guidelines relevant to typical contexts of abuse.

These guidelines were created through collaboration with women and men in the ayahuasca community across different cultural contexts, including indigenous as well as Western victims and survivors of abuse, and ayahuasca healers and ceremonial facilitators.

Researchers and regional experts have also been consulted. Please note that this guide is trying to cover indigenous, mestizo, religious, therapeutic, neoshamanic and New Age circles, so not all items are applicable to all contexts. Please use your best judgement. **Safety**

Guidelines

1. **Consider Drinking with Friends.** Partaking in ayahuasca in ceremonies or any healing practice alone with the healer has been a common context in which sexual abuse has occurred. We advise that you consider being accompanied by a trusted companion.
2. **Consider Drinking with Experienced Women or Couples.** As an extra precaution, one may wish to ensure there are female healers or facilitators working in their chosen ceremonial setting. Many reputable places now ensure that experienced women are present to assist and safeguard female participants.
3. **Check Out the Location and Healer.** Check the reputation of any center, shaman or religious leader you plan to participate in a ceremony with through review sites, past participants, and other experienced people in the area. It is highly advised to consult women.
4. **It is Not Necessary for Healers to Touch Intimate Parts of Your Body or any Area to which You Do Not Consent.** Some healings are individually focused on the participant’s body, such as *sopladas* (when the shaman blows tobacco smoke over your body; typically head, chest, spine, hands, and feet) and *limpiezas* or *baños de plantas* (plant baths, whereby saturated plants are poured over you) but they do

NOT entail touching your private parts. If a shaman, religious leader or facilitator does touch you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable during a “healing,” it is your right to assert that you are not okay with this. You can raise the issue on the spot, with trusted facilitators, organizers of the ceremony, or others outside the ceremonial setting.

5. **Curaciones, Sopladas and Limpiezas Do Not Require You to Remove Your Clothes.** It is certainly not necessary for you to be naked. It's true that in certain Colombian yage traditions, it is usual for participants to be asked to remove their shirt for a *limpieza*, but it is normal for bras or camisoles to be kept on. This is also true for plant baths, for which you can wear swimwear, underwear, or whatever you feel comfortable with. A healer may offer to do a “special” or individual healing outside of the ceremony that can be very beneficial, but know that you are free to interrupt or decline any treatment. You may wish to ask another participant or a trusted companion to be with you during any such treatment. You have the right to be assertive about your personal needs to feel comfortable, regardless of any resistance from the healer.
6. **Look out for Warning Signs that a Healer’s Intentions with You Might Be Sexual.** For example: if he is complimentary of your looks, he is overly “touchy” with you, he tells you his wife doesn’t mind him having sex with other women, he encourages pacts of silence and secrecy between you, he says he wants to teach you love magic, he states that ayahuasca can enhance sexual activity, or he declares that you are special and chosen and offers you ceremonial and religious status. Beware that these kinds of comments and actions have shown that a healer is likely trying to seduce you.
7. **Sexual Intercourse Between Healer and Patient During Ceremonies or directly after the Ceremonies is Not Acceptable in Ayahuasca Traditions.** If a ceremonial leader wants to have sex with you during or soon after the ceremony, he is committing a transgression. This is considered inappropriate and spiritually dangerous in all traditions.
8. **Sexual Intercourse with a Healer Does Not Give You Special Power and Energy.** This is a relatively common argument made by men who want to have sex with their ceremonial participants; it can also be a major motivation for why women sometimes flirt, reciprocate flirtations or willingly engage in sexual relations with healers. While no participant can be told what they can and cannot do with their bodily autonomy, sleeping with a shaman will not make you a shaman, neither will it heal you from your past sexual trauma.
9. **Consider Cultural Differences and Local Behavioral Norms when Interacting with Native Healers.** There are some rather benign interactions in Western culture that carry different meanings elsewhere, and can potentially be culturally inappropriate and misunderstood. Overt or internalized misogynistic tendencies that view women as being passive—meaning that men merely need to be verbally or physically suggestive with women for sex to take place—are a widespread problem in South America and elsewhere. It may be helpful to consider cultural differences when interacting with healers and their community, as certain behaviors, such as being alone with men, being complimentary, prolonged eye contact or “free spirited”

behavior, like bathing naked in public spaces, can be misconstrued as gestures of sexual interest. We are not stating that misinterpretation of cross-cultural codes is justified, only that individuals can benefit from being aware of such potential misinterpretations.

10. **Consider Cultural Differences and Local Clothing Customs.** Non-local women are often viewed as being desirable, exotic, and sexually promiscuous across cultures. Without condoning these misconceptions and their underlying assumptions, it may be helpful, for your own protection, to consider local clothing customs when attending ceremonies and traveling around in foreign countries. Indeed, the request to not wear revealing clothing is common for many spiritual, meditation, and other healing retreats.
11. **Protect Your Personal Space.** Physically and spiritually: before, during, and after ceremony. Healers with integrity will respect your right to do this. You should not feel obliged to engage in verbal or physical communication with healers, facilitators or anyone else during or following ceremony.
12. **Be Wary of Healers Who Offer Psychoactive Substances Other Than Those Used During Ceremonies.** The use of additional psychoactive substances within and outside of ceremonies, besides medicinal plants used in the ayahuasca brew and for shamanic *dietas*, is sometimes associated with scenarios of abuse. These substances may be presented as “medicines” or therapeutic treatments involving the healing of energy imbalances, or “sexual chakra releases.”
13. **He’s a Shaman, Not a Saint!** Remember, shamans and other ceremonial or religious leaders are men (and women) with human flaws, sexual urges, and the potential to abuse their power and cause harm. They do not necessarily live according to the moral standards one might expect of a spiritual leader. Imagining certain individuals to have superhuman qualities is likely an erroneous and dangerous misconception.
14. **If a Violation Occurs, Get Support.** Don’t suffer in silence. It’s not your fault if you experience abuse. Ideally, speak out on the spot or let someone in a leadership position within the ceremony circle itself know. If you are able to report the abuse immediately, it can send a strong message that this will not be tolerated and potentially protect other women from harm. However, you may not feel safe to do this or, you may not fully realize abuse has occurred until after the fact. It is very common for women who have been previously traumatized to experience a “freeze” response during a violation or uncomfortable situation. You have the right to report this abuse afterward, even if you were unable to address it at the time. Seek outside support and, if necessary, legal advice. Different countries have different legislations; try to get informed about your rights and where an incident can be reported.
15. **Beware of what Might Appear to be Consensual Sex.** Consent should happen in a mutually intelligible language where “consent” means the same things to all individuals involved. If you are considering having a sexual encounter with a shaman or facilitator, bear in mind that consensual sex may still involve an imbalance and abuse of power. It is also possible, according to some shamanic practices, for ceremonial leaders to intentionally influence participants into feeling attraction

towards them, through love magic and other techniques. Allow time for integration and for the effects of ayahuasca and its often-ensuing sense of empowerment or euphoria to wear off so that you can apply clear judgement.

16. **Beware of Getting Romantically Involved.** Feeling attraction toward the *ayahuasquero* or a fellow participant can happen. As part of their ceremonial experience, some women have dreams and visions about the shaman or other fellow participants, and can get sexually aroused before, during, and after ceremonies. Such feelings are normal and one should not be ashamed of them. However, consider that pursuing these feelings in concrete terms might generate several problems for you and, furthermore, a shaman's partner, family, and community.
17. **If You are Aware of or Witness Sexual Abuse, Speak Up!** We are all responsible for combating sexual abuse in our communities. Collaborative efforts are essential to denouncing perpetrators and eradicating sexual abuse in ayahuasca circles.

Resources

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Chacruna's Women and Psychedelics Forum, November 19, 2018, CIIS, California: <https://chacrana.net/women-psychedelic-forum/>

To download this publication in additional languages see:

<https://chacrana.net/community/ayahuasca-community-guide-for-the-awareness-of-sexual-abuse/>

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