**Amongst the Plants**

The *curanderos'* garden in the Peruvian Ucayali region as a meeting point
for interspecies communication between human, plant, animal and other selves.

Master Thesis
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entre las plantas
una película de
mark lindenberg
flor rodriguez araujo
karina guenacho rodriguez
julio apaestegui escobar

Poster of film: *Entre las Plantas (Amongst the Plants)*

Painted by: Alex Rodriguez Sebastian
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Digital retouch by: Mark Lindenberg

**Abstract of Film**

*Entre las Plantas* (Amongst the Plants) portrays a Peruvian Amazonian family living in the Ucayali region. Flor, Karina and Julio work and communicate with plants that according to their *Asháninka* culture have an elevated status of teachers. In their garden they cultivate medicinal plants to protect against negative energies and to heal their Peruvian and foreign clients. During the night, they sing to 'the mother of all plants', plant-teacher Ayahuasca, for her to visit, heal and to consult on how they can help their clientele. In their garden, which is a microcosmos in itself, good and evil seems in a constant duel as dangerous gorillas and snakes get contested by brave chickens and eagles. With patience the film-maker learns as an apprentice how plant, animal and human work together in this garden for his own and other's healing process.

**Abstract of Text**

This thesis foregrounds the communication between humans and plants who have been elevated in some Amerindian Indigenous cultures to the status of teachers. In this multispecies ethnography, I will focus on the communication between *curanderos* and plant-teachers, like Ayahuasca. In and around the Amazonian city of Pucallpa, Peru, I observe commonalities and differences in their interspecies communication. Through the concepts of Amerindian multinaturalism, contamination and communication I come to experience interspecies communication in a mutual relationship. In order to allow for multispecies ethnography that includes plant-teachers, I have to take on Indigenous knowledge and open up my world to not only include plants as 'selves' but also to enter a parallel world where spirits intersect, connect and communicate with one another. This multimodal output entails a written analysis on the preparation and communication in a human-plant relationship with additional audio- and video-fragments, photography, illustrations, and an ethnographic film *Entre las Plantas*, which foregrounds the co-operation between *curanderos*, their clients and plant-teachers. This research attempts to bridge a gap created in previous colonial forms of research that concentrated on interspecies interaction in hierarchical relationships and attempts to present mutualism between humans and non-humans.

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**To the Reader**

This multimodal ethnography contains two elements: a written thesis and an ethnographic film, *Entre las Plantas* (Amongst the Plants). It is advisable to watch the film first before reading the thesis. The written part is accompanied with, photos, illustrations, sounds and short videos. Some of these videos are the extended version of the scenes in *Entre las Plantas*. For a user-friendly experience all the sounds and videos are uploaded towards one collection on Vimeo and are accessible with the password: elP2020. The additional material is also handed in offline on a USB-stick for repository purposes. The videos and sounds are numbered in chronological order forthcoming in this thesis. An 'Overview of Audio-visual Material' can be found on page 10.

In the written thesis some names have been changed, others have been conserved, to embrace the interlocutors' wishes.

This research is not meant to advocate experiencing the practices forthcoming in this thesis. That decision must, in my opinion, be a personal one, well over-thought with accepting the responsibility that comes with it.

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**Overview of Audio-visual Material**

[1] Film: *Entre las Plantas* (Amongst the Plants)

[2] Video-fragment: Julio smokes Tabacco

[3] Audio-fragment: Karina sings – *Abrete Corazon*

[4] Video-fragment: Julio talks about the roles of the animals.

[5] Audio-fragment: Karina sings – *Cura Kolibri*

[6] Audio-fragment: Julio sings – *Agila, Agile*

[7] Audio-fragment: Karina sings – *Mankiari*

**My Announced Arrival**

'I saw you.'
'In my dreams I saw you coming.'
'They told me you have a good heart.'
'Let's meet tomorrow at eight in the morning.'
'See you tomorrow, Mark.'

Mesmerized, I give the phone back to
Julio, the tour-guide who I met this afternoon.
He talks further to Karina while my head fills up
with questions. Did she just mention that she
knew about my arrival? 'They' told her about me.
Are 'they' who I think they are?
Julio ends the call and turns to me.
'Let's smoke Tabacco outside at the riverside.'

At the port I thank Julio for calling the godmother
of one of his children. He tells me he will join me tomorrow.
Together we watch the serene Ucayali river lit by the moon
and I wonder if the talking entities Karina mentioned
would be willing to conversate with me as well.

practices and experience what it means to bond with a plant-teacher. Everyone whose purpose does not necessarily entail healing is considered to be an apprentice. Apprentices learn from the *curandero*, who initiates the ceremony and ways to communicate with plant-teachers. Through this communication, plant-teachers can, in their turn, help to heal and teach how to heal.

In ceremony the plant-teacher Ayahuasca is drunk. The Ayahuasca brew consists of two plants, the Ayahuasca liana and Chacruna leaves, who are cooked for a certain amount of days through which the liana and leaves transform into a brown viscous brew. Under the right circumstances and by following the plants' protocol, these plants, now inseparable, can transcend the participants into a dreamlike state where information in different forms and senses can be received. This information is perceived as teachings from the plant-teacher. *Curanderos* (masculine) and *curanderas* (feminine) work with plants to either heal their clients with medicinal plants, or to receive information through the interaction with plant-teachers.

In Western science there is unbelief how the two main plants, a vine (Banisteriopsis caapi)

**From Plant to Person**

Plants announcing my arrival is something quite alien to me. I had read about human-plant communication which fascinated me, but now I experienced a situation in which the plants started talking about me to their co-habitants. Some Peruvian Amazonian cultures consider plants who communicate information to humans as teachers. Plant-teachers are perceived as important counsellors. This thesis foregrounds the interaction between human and plants and how humans establish and maintain a connection to their plant-allies. In this multispecies ethnography, I will focus on the communication between *curanderos*[1] and plant-teachers, conforming myself into an apprentice role to be able to be close to their

[1] *Curandero* could be translated to 'healer', I have adopted the naming of *curandero* as agreed with by my interlocutors. There are categories within the container *curandero* like, amongst others, *Ayahuasquero* (one who works with Ayahuasca to heal) and *Tabaquero* (one who works with Tabacco to heal). In some literature, and by some tourists and touristic Ayahuasca centers the word 'shaman' is used, in the terminology section I explain why I do not use this container.

and a leaf (Psychotria viridis), were brought together to create the brew Ayahuasca, as the Amazon hosts a multiplicity of plants. However, there is no enigma involved for the interlocutors as described in literature (e.g., Davis 2008). When I ask my interlocutors how Ayahuasca was 'invented' their answer is unanimous 'the plants talk to us'. Ayahuasca and other mind-altering plant-teachers are considered in some Indigenous cultures to have a spirit, and their spirit is capable of communicating and transferring information to the ones who ingest her, through the visionary state (Whitten and American Council of Learned Societies 1976).

According to recent research there has been little interest in perceiving psycho-active plants as subjects instead of objects in anthropology (Dev 2018). Dev (2018) encourages research that incorporates plants as social agents in collaboration with other species as in 'the encounter lies the creative and transformative potential' (2018: 199), which might provide a different viewpoint on what knowledge is, who produces, and how to produce it.

The multispecies relation between the *curandero* and the plant takes place in the physical environment, the garden, and in an invisible realm where spirits meet and interact with one another. My initial thought was to focus on 'just' these two species, human and plant. Yet during my fieldwork I experienced a rich ecology of selves, containing animals, other species and spirits, who are included in this thesis. Just like in the human species, the plant species is diverse, and every plant is unique, having his or her own character and properties. In the ceremonies, however, it is the plant species' spirit who humans connect to.

The ethnographic fieldwork had a duration of two and half months and took place in and around Pucallpa, an Amazonian city in Peru, located near the Ucayali river, which has a variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures interacting and communicating with other species. I searched for *curanderos* who are self-employed and thereby not employed by larger Ayahuasca tourism centres for ethical reasons, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter.

By visiting and living together with the different *curanderos* and their families, I was able to observe and participate in the practices concerning the communication with the plants which happens both in the material as in the untouchable. I apply the concept of contamination by Tsing (2015) to understand the distinctive lessons the plants communicate when I participate in the practices with different *curanderos* and question myself what I learn from the plant and what I learn from the *curandero*. As Tsing

(2015: 27) explains that we are beings of contamination, and we and our worlds get shaped through interaction, I actively seek for this contamination to understand how *curanderos* are able to communicate with non-humans, contaminating myself with the *curandero*'s world's subjects and objects. In this endeavour, I also retain myself from other worlds' interactions which I will elude on in the chapter 'Mother's Prerequisites'.

In the ethnographic film '*Entre las Plantas*' I live with one *curanderos'* multispecies family, participate in their daily life and foreground their ways of working with the plants concerning healing and teaching. The film foregrounds the relation the family has with the multiple plants they interact with and how they approach them as their family members and as guides who heal and consult. It portrays their engagement with their clients who are foreign and Peruvian but also with me as an apprentice and how I slowly, through their guidance, get to know the plants. Not explicitly but when watched closely, the film also tells the story of knowledge that runs through generations and gets transmitted by humans and non-humans.

In my efforts to let the audience meet and come in close contact with my interlocutors' world, I engage with a form of observational cinema that produces a 'sense of familiarity' (MacDougall in Suhr and Willerslev 2013: 18). I agree with MacDougall that 'the stranger' on the screen can become more familiar through the commonalities 'that cut across cultural boundaries' (MacDougall in Suhr and Willerslev 2013: 18). I let the audience familiarize with 'the other' by inviting them with me into the garden. In the film, the audience becomes my fellow apprentice when I learn from the *curanderos*' practices and experience communication with plant-teachers in an untouchable world. As the topics of *curanderos* and Ayahuasca are prone to be exoticized, which creates a distance between the audience and the 'wonderous other', I have chosen also to portray family life interwoven with the *curanderos*' practices, which include visits to the market, eating and kids playing.

My interest into this specific interspecies relationship comes forth out of my own medical history. After being diagnosed and successfully treated for melanoma my body was scarred from multiple surgeries. Several months passed and I lost faith in my body's recovery. With the help of psychologists, a psychiatrist and anti-depressant pills I was not able to let go of my old body and embrace my unfamiliar one. Moreover, my inattentiveness was labelled as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), which I internalized through which it became 'real' (Hacking 1995). Although I do not renounce modern healthcare as it has proven its worth to me, at that moment, I felt that these practices were

not bringing me closer to accepting my new self. In search for something other, I projected faith towards the healing and teaching powers of non-human entities because of my mostly positive experiences throughout my twenties with them. I grew and micro-dosed psilocybin-containing mushrooms, scheduling them like a medicine, in a safe and comfortable environment, and after some weeks, the mushroom might have helped me to change me into someone who is ready to adapt to the changes. At that moment I had not seen this other entity as a teacher nor a self and merely acknowledged the mushroom in a biological scientific way for 'its' psylocibin to help me change. My choice of researching Amazonian plant-teachers instead of mushrooms comes forth out of the growing popularity globally and controversy haunting Ayahuasca (Dobkin De Rios and Rumrrill 2009).

With this thesis I contribute towards a multispecies ethnography foregrounding communication and contamination between human, plant and other entities. Mutualism, or striving for mutualism between species, has been under lit in former anthropology which paid attention to the predator-prey roles or the act of, in Tsing's words, 'wiping each other out' (2015: 139), which brings us back to the earliest purpose of the discipline anthropology in colonial forms to study 'the other' to dominate them. Eurocentric knowledge systems have hierarchically presented themselves as relevant and thereby marginalizing the knowledge of 'others' (Escobar 2007). In this thesis I make a counterturn and involve non-humans as collaborators to explore different ways of knowing, and embrace Indigenous knowledge, such as acknowledging the existence of spirits. By performing this type of anthropology, I hope to form an example for other researchers to admit our at times unacknowledged anthropocentrism, and open up to different routes that were not taken before by science.

Focusing on interspecies relationships, where we purposely let ourselves be contaminated and thereby learn from cultures and natures might recover other perspectives on human life in co-existence with other selves that have been previously neglected (Tsing 2015: 139). In this thesis, I propose multinaturalism as a way in which we can transform plants from 'them' to 'us', through the commonality of being 'selves' (Viveiros De Castro 2005) and reflect on how I adapted the concept of communication when it involves human and non-human species. I will elucidate further on this in the chapter 'Amongst the Plants'. But before we enter the garden I will provide some contemporary and historical context.

**Back upwards on the Ucayali river**

The first light of day reflected on the Ucayali river. The harsh, roaring sound of the motor, the water splashing on the boat and the cold wind is not of any hindrance for most of the Peruvians to go back to sleep. They had exchanged their warm beds for hard chairs on the long river boat. While we are heading back to Pucallpa, I capture the scenery, the beautiful sunrise contrasting my thoughts of negativity and failure.

The deafening sound of the motor reminded me of the generator getting turned on after the sunset by *curandero* Enrique, who exchanges the nightly sounds of the jungle for the fuelled machine. It powers the lightbulb, which assists me to continue writing in my diary in the dark, revealing as well the *maloka*'s[2] many flying and crawling inhabitants who get attracted towards the luminous object.

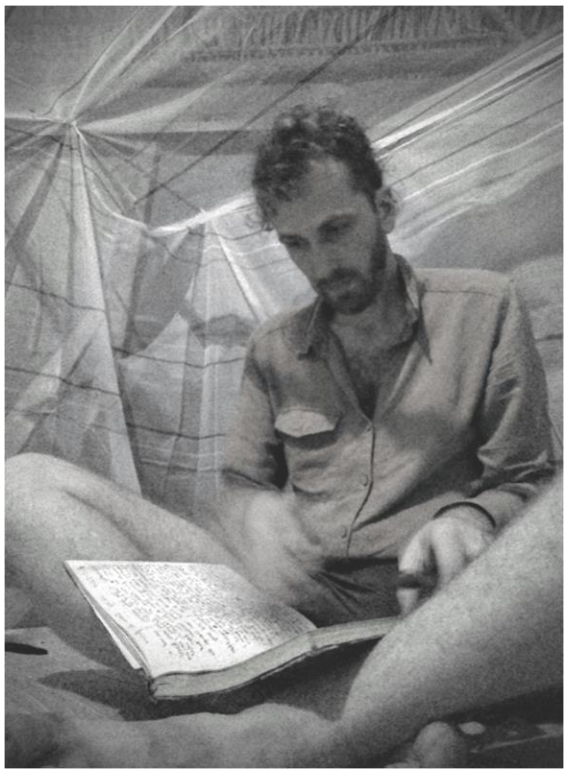
I am alone in the *maloka* on a thin mattress under my mosquito net. Once more I re-arrange my mosquito net to retain myself from their company. The big holes in the nets of the poor-maintained *maloka* provide entrance to the insects. A big bright blue light is summoned in the house in front of me. It has the same magnetic quality as the bulb but instead of insects it attracts the younger people in the area. The blaring generator sound which has become the new standard got competition by sounds inside the house. It was competing with tense music, screams and gunshots which the machine created itself.

The television which plays, assuming from its produced sounds, mostly horror movies is the main reason the generator got ignited and it contributed to my feelings of wanting to leave this place. Over the last three days I felt isolated, a fish in the wrong pond. The aged *curandero* Enrique and his family were living in the four houses on the terrain and I stayed in the *maloka*. I was not used to this, not feeling welcome in Peru, not being invited for

[2] A *maloka* is a ceremonial place where the *curandero* and his clients drink Ayahuasca in order to connect and communicate with the spirits.

talking, food or watching this monstrous screen. Here I feel like the monstrous outsider (Eljaiek-Rodríguez 2018) and they might have seen me as a horror-character, like the dangerous 'white vampire' Narby (2019) had become when studying Ayahuasca in the Amazon.

My attempts of approaching Enrique to conversate about his relation and communication with plants had turned out unsuccessful. I felt his impatience when conversating with me as every question led to short answers and seemed like one too much. After our short struggling interview, he seemed satisfied to leave the *maloka*. He turned to me and asked me to pay 50 soles[3]. I felt tricked by Enrique not announcing this up front. On my first day we discussed the costs of my stay here. In comparison with his competition he asked a significantly bigger amount of money for his services as *curandero*. However, I agreed to stay, as he consented that I would conduct research concerning him and his practices. In a friendly tone I expressed myself towards him that I did not know that an interview will cost extra, as I already paid for food, water and gas for the generator, and will be paying him for his services in the ceremonies. He did not look at me and without a word he left me and the *maloka*. His money-driven character had



*'I am in doubt if I should be here'* *(Journal 25-1-2020)*
*photo by author*

given me doubt about the legitimacy of his role as *curandero* as through Ayahuasca tourism many charlatans had entered the field as well.

It was my first experience being asked money for talking about plants. Nowadays the plants have obtained another role next to their role as teacher or medicine. They bring economic benefit for the ones who know how to collaborate with them and for charlatans who pretend that they know. The plants have been transformed into a commodity, an object with economic value, available for a larger public (Appudurai 1986).

[3] 50 soles is comparable to eight meals in an eating place.

*Curandero* López (2020) completes my thoughts stating that an older *Shipibo*[4] man drinking Ayahuasca must be a 'great sage' while actually many of them turned into *curanderos* because of the rising popularity and demand for Ayahuasca 15 to 20 years ago. In the eighties and nineties there was solely one *curandero* in each *Shipibo* community. Now, due to the economic benefits, there are up to 15 or 20 *curanderos* working around the same location.

Ayahuasca tourism has reached the communities around Pucallpa and the green plants are exchanged for green dollar bills. The touristic high demand of the so-called 'shaman'[i] has given opportunity to pseudo-shamans to fulfil this request (Dobkin de Rios 2005: 203). They are attracted by the big amounts of money which can be extracted from psychedelic experience-seekers, those who seek a solution for their physical or mental problems and Western apprentices who are eager to learn about the practices of the *curandero*. Next to economic gain there are practitioners who do not necessarily have the intention to do good by actually helping clients but merely are out to showcase their powers for ego-centric purposes (Almendro 2019). Trauma, danger and sometimes even death come forth out of charlatans, who sexually intimidate or assault their clientele (Fernandez 2018) or 'shamans' who lack training (López 2020).

One of my interlocutors, Ángel, a *curandero* with the age of 67, stated that nowadays it is important to know with who you are drinking for these reasons. Next to that he tells me that a lot of so-called *curanderos* ask money before they have cured the person and the money seems more of the interest of the *curandero* than their clienteles' healing.

Next to the blooming of pseudo-shamans, Ayahuasca retreat centers have been sprouting up around Pucallpa and are examples of where the payment happens upfront and mostly from other sides of the world. Nowadays one only has to 'surf for a shaman' (Holman 2011). Combining the search terms 'Pucallpa' and 'Ayahuasca' reveals multiple options to pay in advance to secure a place in one of the many *malokas*. This uncomplicated practice, of clicking to order, brings complications in the form of cultural commodification and appropriation towards its derived context (Holman 2011; Tupper 2009). Commodification of Indigenous knowledge happens when Indigenous people are exploited for touristic purposes and are paid little money for their

[4] In this thesis, I bring up Indigenous cultures like *Shipibos, Asháninkas* and *Cocamas* who communicate with plant-teachers.

services while the owner of the centre, who occasionally is a Westerner, benefits (Personal communication 2020)[ii].

Nowadays the commercialisation of Ayahuasca, or by several interlocutors called the 'prostitution of the medicine', has led towards major price inflations. Foreigners are willing to pay large amounts of money which outnumbers the locals to learn or heal as they do not possess this quantity of monetary wealth. Almost all of my interlocutors were born into a family where at least one of their parents is or was a *curandero*. The ones who did not grow up in a *curandero* family, integrated in one later on, and learned through that family.

Even though there might be potential positive economic prospects to become a *curandero* the amount of discipline and long-time training has turned the younger generation off from pursuing it as a career. A conversation in Yarina Cocha with a young *Shipibo* informed me that other time-consuming practices as soccer, music and spending time with his family were main reasons not to follow the paths that his father and uncle had paved as *curanderos*. During my fieldwork I have only met three Peruvian apprentices, who were outnumbered by the many Western apprentices.

Almendro (2019) gives us a definition of a capable *curandero*: he works with very few people at once and is interested in the clients' healing or apprentices' personal development when working with the plants. Beyer (2009) adds to this definition that a capable *curandero* has completed many years of apprenticeship, experienced time of isolation in the jungle with a diet, and retained during this period from sexual activities. The *curandero* is the guide for communication with plants, taking his apprentices to these spaces and realms in the non-material world where knowledge can be received from the plants, and is merely a witness of this transmission process. They are able to hand the tools and guide towards this point by providing the plant and safe-guarding the physical and spiritual environment in which the communication takes place. Next to a capable *curandero*, a preparation and discipline towards the plants' protocol is needed to be able to receive from and communicate with plant-teachers. I will elaborate on this in the chapter 'Mother's Prerequisites'.

Stoller (1997: xvii) describes, the role of participation in performing ethnography as a vulnerable process. The body of the researcher is loaned as a tool to conduct research. Concerning my own research in interspecies communication, I lend myself as a tool to open up to altered states of consciousness. Hereby trust in the *curandero*'s

expertise is key for a safe context. During my fieldwork and through my interlocutors, I learned that my research also opens up to my spirit, soul and heart, which, again, requires carefulness when conducting this research. I sensed I had not found the 'right' *curandero* yet to trust and to research what it means to communicate with plants and as a consequence I packed my backpack and returned to the boat going upwards on the river trusting my gut feeling and respecting my own rule: 'don't press on, when there is no trust'.

I continue my search for *curanderos* who want to introduce me to their gardens, who are eager to share their experiences when engaging with plant-teachers and willing to let me participate in their daily and nightly routine. With their guidance, these *curanderos* can introduce me as an apprentice to the plants they have a relation with, to work towards a possibility of communication with the plants and their teachings to understand in what ways and forms those get expressed. In this endeavour, I will use the concepts of multinaturalism, communication and contamination which I will elude on along the way.

In the next chapter I will give some historical highlights how plant-teachers have changed through time and cultural encounters to strengthen the understanding of the transformation towards the current situation that I have described in this chapter.

*'It was left to fabulists, including non-Western and non- civilizational storytellers, to remind us of the lively activities of all beings, human and not human'*

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015: vii)

**How she Changes through Cultural Contact**

Pucallpa and its surrounding are located on the Ucayali river that has a long history with different cultures engaging with plant-teachers. Amongst those are the *Cashibo, Cocama, Asháninka, Shipibo, Conibo* and *Mestizo* populations, whereby only the *Cashibos* do not engage with Ayahuasca (Ethnographic Museum Pucallpa 2020). The *Pano* population were the first settlers in this location, who arrived 2000 BCE (World Atlas 2017). Around 1534, at times of colonization, other populations like Portuguese immigrants and *Mestizos* started inhabiting the area as well. Because of the ecological circumstances and the dense population who inhabited the jungle, the *conquistadors* were unable to conquer this part of Peru (Davis 2009: 81-82). They had conquered the highlands and had added a different perspective and practice towards plant-teachers. The Coca plant, which the *Incas* had received as a gift from their God, the Sun, Inti, is one of these examples which underwent a colonial perspective and purpose. The Spanish presence had forbidden the use of the Coca leaf for Indigenous and religious purposes and began to use it in forced labour (Morales 1989: 90) because of his properties to increase his chewers' stamina, thereby making the plant fuel for their slaves. Among my interlocutors are *Asháninkas*, *Shipibos* and *Cocamas* who all refer to the *Incas* as their ancestors. Coca is used by the *Asháninkas* and *Cocamas* in their *curandero* practices. Nowadays next to his use for spiritual purposes he is also used to produce cocaine for export which brings criminal activity to the region (Saffón 2020).

*'Coca is really important because when you are in the darkness in your vision, coca will bring the light and all darkness is gone'*
*Ángel*
*photo by author*

Plants and people who call the Amazon their home are and have been exposed to

entrepreneurs seeking for economical gain in her natural resources. The Rubber trees' white blood has shown the dark side in the Amazon forest casting an economic shadow which made greedy entrepreneurs work together 'to *conquer* Indians and use them as rubber gatherers[.] […] Traders coached the missionaries how to track down hidden Indians' (Taussig 1989: 383). The film '*El abrazo de la serpiente'* (Embrace of the serpent; Guerra 2015) presents this by showing how different cultural encounters and colonialism leave their damaging mark on the Amazon and all species who inhabit it during and after 'the rubber boom'.

'The rubber boom', happening between 1860 to 1920, is an example of the oppression of Indigenous cultures and their way of living. During this period, the population of multiple Indigenous groups were murdered or captivated and forced into labour. Slaves from different cultured groups were kept in so called, 'rubber camps' (De Mori 2011: 33) and here cultural values between the slaves have been exchanged (Taussig 1989). This cultural exchange included the transfer of knowledge about plants and led to a spreading use of Ayahuasca amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous who came in contact with other cultured *curanderos*. Next to transfer between Indigenous groups, *Mestizos* working in the rubber camps obtained their plant knowledge as well (Fotiou 2016: 158). In rubber-tap areas, where the local population had died either of being murdered or through disease, African slaves were moved in to replace their labour. Through Indigenous, African and European exchange, Ayahuasca had been adapted in to a Christian-religious form which later was named the Santo Daime (Kahpi 2020).

The first known written account of the plant-teacher Ayahuasca was written by the historian José Chantre y Herrera who had composed a document based upon descriptions written between 1648-1698 by Jesuit missionaries who had witnessed a ceremony (Kahpi 2020):

*'The people look at each other, frightened and trembling. The liar repeats the same words many times, and a murmuring rises from the people, who speak in low voices, afraid of what will happen. When the sorcerer sees the assembled people possessed and fixed in fear, he screams and says … "You will hear, you will hear." And, with this, the people are consoled and filled with high hopes'*

(Chantre y Herrera 2016 [1675]).

This negative and assumptive account foregrounding Ayahuasca and Indigenous people as deceiving has been written down to create the irrational 'other' and, as described by Luna and White (2000), to put the Jesuit missions on a pedestal.

The Jesuit missionaries had little understanding of what this human-plant relation entailed for the Indigenous. Their Eurocentric lens was mostly looking for plants who had economical worth or medical qualities already known in Europe (Williams 2015: 29). Apprentice Adelina explained to me how in prior times missionaries had forbidden her aunt to connect to and smoke the Tabacco plant as their Christian God would not appreciate it. As a consequence, her aunt started smoking under a blanket in hope this God would not see and punish her.

Manuel Villavicencio, a geographer who came in contact with Indigenous accustomed with plant-teachers, was the first who noticed and reported the invisible value for them. His report on Ayahuasca could overstep cultural barriers, bringing a different understanding of what the plants' qualities are for the Indigenous (idem):

*'It is a vine which the [Indians] use to guess, predict, and answer correctly the difficult questions […] it shows you the decision you should make'*

(Villavicencio 1858: 374 in Williams 2015: 40-41).

Villavicencio describes the liana as an ally for Indigenous people, as the liana can be ingested and thereafter called upon for advice. His 'attempt to think with the thoughts of others' (Kohn 2015: 316-317) confirms and complements Lévi-Strauss' statement that native thoughts have their own logic and concepts (Lévi-Strauss 1966). In a similar manner as Villavicencio has interpreted, my interlocutors repeatedly expressed their relation to Ayahuasca:

*'She will answer if it is of importance to know'*

*'The medicine will show you'*

*'She does not lie'.*

These phrases remind us of the qualities their ally possess, the plant's perception to guide and transfer information. She is not to be undermined, she can be trusted as she, unlike humans, has no interest in lying and knows what information to transmit and knows for which questions the time has come to be answered. The plant in these quotes the *curanderos* are referring to, Ayahuasca, and in particular the spirit she embodies, is personalized and gendered by giving her a multiplicity of names and roles such as grandmother, mother, doctor, medic and teacher. Conceiving her as 'kinds of humans' (Viveiros De Castro 2005: 465), and turning plant-teachers into a family member through a family role establishes a social relationship between the human and non-human (Viveiros De Castro 2005: 465). In an Amerindian perspective plants, humans and

animals have spirits (Viveiros de Castro 2005). Even though there is a corporal difference between plants, humans and animals, we are related through our spirits in a multinaturalism perspective (Viveiros De Castro 1998: 478). In this perspective, the body is a container, a clothing which conceals an internal humanoid form (Viveiros De Castro 2005: 465), whose spirit can be called upon by *curanderos*. The spiritual unity opens up a way of communication towards each other's spirit, especially in ceremonies where *curanderos* call upon the plants' spirits and properties.

Although she may not lie, she should not be blindly trusted either according to Matias, an apprentice:

*'She will test you, try to offer you contracts that present a faster way of learning, a shortcut'.*

These shortcuts, he explains, are forms of black magic or sorcery and the plant tests the ones who try to understand her powers. Even though presented in a positive and supportive role, the plants can be 'dangerous, fickle, jealous and may abandon the [*curandero*] without warning' (Beyer 2009: 91-92). A different name for Ayahuasca reveals her darker side, 'vine of the death' (Kjellgren, Eriksson and Norlander 2009: 309), which is a name not so commonly used, as people seem to refer more towards her roles that enlighten and nurture.

*Curanderos* have power to heal but also to harm and thereby they can be accused of sorcery. Risking to be avenged or even killed by people who accuse them to have suffered a loss through their misconduct (Freedman 2000). A *curandero* who seems on the light side can still become corrupted by power and therefore they are always under the loupe by the people in their surroundings. A few months before my arrival a *curandero* had been shot in Yarina Cocha as he was accused for being a *brujo*, a witch, involved in narco-trafficking, corrupted by money (Personal communication 2020). These darker sides of the practices are in the nowadays touristic plant experiences not mentioned on the entrepreneurs' websites as these 'less digestible' (Fotiou 2016: 165) elements coming with it might turn the tourist off in its romanticized image in search for authentic healers living in the light. Tourism enterprises thereby empower Rousseau's stereotype and invented character of 'the noble savage' (Cranston 1991) which displays their natural goodness and as unaffected by the outer world. This fabricated image of Indigenous living in a harmonious state with nature isolates them from a globalized and intersecting world and undermines the issues that these groups undergo as for example

their fight for territorial rights (Fotiou 2016: 165).

In 1852, botanist Richard Spruce travelled six years on the multiple rivers flowing through Brazil, Venezuela, Peru and Ecuador and noticed the cultivation of Ayahuasca among various Indigenous people and was one of the first who made the plant travel outside of the Amazon to be analysed in England (Spruce 2014). Around the second millennium diverse research on Ayahuasca gained popularity. This research includes, amongst other topics, her chemical components (Callaway et al. 1996), her use as a healer (Schmid, Jungaberle and Verres
2010) and more philosophical topics such as how Ayahuasca could help humans in global issues regarding patriarchy (Naranjo 2019).

Her global popularity grew through persons such as philosopher Terrence McKenna, books such as 'The Cosmic Serpent' (Narby 1998), and films such as the documentary 'The Last Shaman' (Degan 2016). Where I try to de-exoticize the *curanderos* and the plants in *Entre las Plantas*, 'The Last Shaman' creates, through its experimental and adventurous elements, an image of sensation and wonder. Nowadays, Ayahuasca is a global phenomenon and ceremonies, legal and illegal, can be found in all continents (Kahpi 2020). Even though the plants have established their roots elsewhere in the world, the Amazon keeps being a popular setting to be lectured by the plants because of her location rich in nature and her Indigenous *curanderos*.

In the following chapter I move myself through Pucallpa and its surroundings in search of a self-employed *curandero* who is willing to introduce me to the plant-teacher Ayahuasca, in the hope I can learn to establish a form of communication with her.

*'All the cultures in the civilized world are cultures that have turned against nature […] same as we mistreated the earth and the plant species and the animals, we have also mistreated our own body and our own nature, particularly our instinctive nature'*

Claudio Naranjo (2019)

**Navigating the Labyrinth**

Unlike the Ayahuasca centres that advertise on the internet and in local tourist hubs, self-employed *curanderos* are not using these business- and competition-driven strategies to lure clients. As their gardens are behind gates one cannot tell where a *curandero* lives. Only their plants who peek over the fence might give an indication, but this is no guarantee as engagement with plants is not solely done by *curanderos* (Beyer 2009: 193). In Pucallpa and its surroundings there is some basic general knowledge circulating in the population about the medicinal capabilities of plants: when you ask people about plants, they start looking around them and talk about the properties they possess.

During my attempts in finding self-employed *curanderos*, I wander through the city centre of Pucallpa and conversate with locals about my purpose and curiosity concerning plants that teach. A lady explains me that she does not believe in communication with plants as she believes in God, not plants. She phrased this as a binary issue, one or the other. Others who believed in plants but not in *curanderos* explained me that they are all *brujos*, who are 'only interested in money'. People lining up in the omnipresent pharmacies indicated that plants had received competition from the pharmaceutical industry which were servicing the humans not convinced of the plants' properties.

Moving more towards Yarina Cocha, an outskirt of Pucallpa, the asphalt converts in dirt roads with pebbles. Instead of the city centres' concrete buildings, wooden houses appear and green gets more prominent. Nature has not been excluded from the eco-sphere as the variety of plants grow wild or are cultivated in gardens. Talking with the people living in Yarina Cocha reveals that the plants here still maintain their role as medicine, because modern medicine is either too expensive or not believed in as a cure but seen as something that only delays the problem and does not address its root.

It is nine in the morning as I enter Maroti Shobo, the collective artworks shop at the main square of Yarina Cocha. The *Shipiba* women sitting on their green plastic chairs at the entrance welcome me whereafter they

continue their conversation. I wander through the store and look at their artworks, the colourful woven carpets small and big representing the songs the plants teach[5][iii]. As I keep walking and come near a stand where a lady is working, she asks me if I am looking for something. As I have no intention of buying something right now, I tell her that I am not really looking for something specific. As I wander further a thought comes up into me and I realize, that I am actually searching, and that this might be the place to ask around. I walk back to the lady and ask her if she could maybe help me bring me in contact with a *curandero*. She does not know one herself but asks me to wait at her stand while she asks someone else. While she walks towards the entrance, I look at the artworks she exposes in her stand. A green snake circling around Chacruna leaves and Ayahuasca flowers fill up the canvas of a white shirt and I think to myself simultaneously how beautiful it is and how impossible it will be for me to keep it virginly unblemished like that. A warm and friendly voice interrupts with my thought. Celestina, dressed in *Shipiba* clothing, asks me if she can help. I explain my purpose and she tells me she is an apprentice herself learning from different *curanderos*. She informs me to come back at twelve and in the meantime she will call her teacher, *curandera* Mikaela, if she is available to meet.

Celestina's interest in introducing me to her teacher gives her opportunities to learn more, as out of our meeting she organized a ceremony in which she and her fourteen-year old daughter joined. She also arranges the materials for the ceremony, bringing mattresses, buckets and water and receives a quarter of what I pay the *curandera* for her services. Other intermediaries like Julio, a tour guide I met in the port of Yarina Cocha, do not receive a monetary reward but get help from the *curandero* for them or their families, and are welcome to join the ceremony when bringing in a client.

Through sound-recorded semi-structured interviews in Spanish/Castellano and with help, in *Shipibo*, I have been able to hear patterns but also differences in the practices of the *curanderos* in their engagement with the plants. The multiple interviews I had held with several *curanderos* had brought me an interesting insight that the plants were seen as family members who come to help and give information through their communication in ceremony. However, sometimes words seemed too limited to understand how these plants could possibly arrive in ceremony and

[5] *Icaros* are the power/healing songs sung in ceremony by the *curandero*. These songs have multiple functions like protecting the space, introducing yourself to the plant-teacher, calling the visions, to alter the visions, to bring joy, to heal and clean. They can be translated into patterns which are amongst others stitched onto carpets and shirts or painted on walls and clay pottery. A further description can be found in the terminology section.

be established communication with. For me as an outsider it remained abstract to understand how these plants could be worthy allies and guides by spending multiple nights a week connecting with them. It came to me that, like Narby (1998) and Corisepa (2019)'s words, I might not understand as I might be too disconnected from nature, raised between four walls, separated from it. Through calling nature 'it', I elucidate that I assume that I am not 'it', as if my humanity excludes me from nature (Viveiros de Castro 2005: 475). This assumption contributes to the constructed 'great divide' in science between human culture and non-human nature (Latour 2012). This divide creates an issue to researchers like me who want to include non-humans as participants in social relations they are researching (Dev 2018: 195). Through calling her 'it', I could not understand this interspecies connection like my interlocutors, who see the humankind as part of nature. My task was not 'to learn' how this perspective of multinaturalism was applied but rather 'take it on' (Wagner 1981: 17). This involved 'taking on' that my body is a form of a particular nature, the human nature, that is part of one culture, a spiritual unity including plants, humans and animals (Viveiros De Castro 2005: 466).

Mikaela and other *curanderos* pointed me their ways of learning from the plants, which is not done through books, talking or other literate forms. They instructed me how I could learn from the plants. Communicating with the plants is 'another way of thinking'. It entailed opening my mind, not thinking with my head but with my heart, to trust the plants because only people who have faith can benefit from them. They assured me that I would understand more through experiencing the plants in ceremony, by singing towards the plants together with the *curandero*. They were confident that the plants would help me with my apprenticeship and provide clarity for this thesis.

I asked *curandera* Mikaela:

'What kind of questions could I ask Ayahuasca?'

'She answers to anything you ask, she answers, there are no bad questions.'

And when I asked another *curandera*, Karina, the same question, she answered:

'The first ceremonies you only ask her to heal you, to cure you, after that you can learn from her'

'Every day you will learn a bit more, step by step, with patience.'

Through multiple experiences with different *curanderos* I gained insights in their ways of

establishing communication with the plants. They reached out with practical tips and through observing them I learned to prepare myself. Before ceremony, *curanderos* mostly take a shower and change into fresh (ceremonial) clothing, clean and dressed up to meet the plants. 'They' became 'we' as I progressed in my apprenticeship, as I started copying and familiarizing myself with the practicalities, and took on the perspective of spiritual unity. We smoked grandfather Tabacco, to attract the good spirits and get rid of the negative ones. We asked the grandfather how we and clients were doing, and he replied by deforming the shape of the burning cigarette [video 2]. We perfumed ourselves with *Palo santo* and *Agua florida* before and during the ceremony to please the spirits of the plants' smelling senses[6] and we chewed Coca to help us concentrate and focus on the light. Even though one can prepare oneself in these practicalities, the 'work', how my interlocutors call it, is to concentrate to open up to a different way of knowing, a different way of communicating and a different sensorial language that I yet had to learn to be able to communicate with these non-human selves who I wished to encounter.

Did I have a chance to communicate with the spirits of the plants having grown up in a society that for a large part had separated from nature? Did I and the generations growing up in these so-called 'civilized' societies lose something valuable on their way striving for 'development'? By turning nature into a resource, a commodity, many humans do not perceive non-humans as equals, as worth engaging with in their physical or non-material form. No one had ever told me they had a plant as a mentor, a guide, a family-member, or as a teacher. Talking about plant-teachers had not been enough to understand how plants can be much more than their physical form and maybe experiencing the plants in ceremony would bring me closer to them and their teachings. I was on my way to let myself be contaminated, a shift in my perspective (Tsing 2015: 27), in which knowing is not limited to humans and thrives through collaboration with other species (Tsing 2015: 22).

[6] To augment the multimodal aspect of this thesis I have included Tabacco, *Palo santo* and *Agua florida.* Next to attracting the spirits of the plants they can help for healing reasons and to remove negative energy. Tabacco should not be inhaled over the lungs and his smoke spread over the body. *Palo santo* can be burned, the smoke can be used to clean the space or the body from negative energy. The little bottle is *Agua florida* which is used to perfume the hands with or spreaded over body parts and can help during the ceremony to calm down the visions by sniffing in the scent.

*Apprentice Celestina (left) and* curandera *Mikaela (right), Mikaela tells me how she was an apprentice of her father, and after he had passed away, continued learning from the plants as her only teachers.*

*photo by author*

| | |
|---|---|
| Abrete corazón | Open your heart |
| Abrete sentimiento | Open up to feel |
| Abrete entendimiento | Open your understanding |
| Deja a un lado la razón | Leave your reason aside |
| Y deja brillar el sol | And let the sun shine |
| Escondido en tu interior. | Who is hidden inside of you. |
| | |
| Abrete memoria antigua | Open up to ancient memory |
| Escondida en la tierra | Hidden in the earth |
| En las plantas | In the plants |
| Bajo el fuego | Below the fire |
| Bajo el agua | Below the water |
| Abrete corazón | Open your heart |
| Abrete sentimiento | Open up to feel |
| Abrete entendimiento | Open your understanding |
| Deja a un lado la razón | Leave your reason aside |
| Y deja brillar el sol | And let the sun shine |
| Escondido en tu interior. | Who is hidden inside of you. |
| | |
| Abrete corazón y recuerda | Open your heart and remember |
| Como el espiritu cura | How the spirit heals |
| Como el amor sana | How love heals |
| Como el arbol florece | How the tree flowers |
| Y la vida perdura | And life goes on |
| Que para llegar a Dios | To get to God |
| Hay que aprender a ser humano. | You have to learn to be human. |

Listen hear the *icaro* as sung in ceremony by Karina Menacho Rodriguez

[audio 3]

*'Every tree, every plant, has a spirit. People may say that the plant has no mind. I tell them that the plant is alive & conscious. A plant may not talk, but there is a spirit in it that is conscious, that sees everything, which is the soul of the plant, its essence, what makes it alive. The channels through which the water & sap move are the veins of the spirit'*

Pablo Amaringo (1999)

**Amongst the Plants**

When entering the *curanderos*' garden, one enters their workshop, which is for most of them their living space as well. Next to their grandfathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and other family members, *curanderos* live in these gardens. Peruvians and foreign clients visit for weeks, a day or for a shorter amount of time to heal their bodily complaints, ranging from a fever, an injured knee to skin-diseases or mental issues, varying from amongst others alcohol and drugs addiction, work, family, relation problems, depressive troubles and *daño*, which is harm that is done through bewitchment, with mostly as reason, envy – or others, like me, who take upon an apprentice role in learning about interspecies communication and the teaching qualities of the plants. The plants have been granted the prominent part of the terrain and outnumber the wooden or brick houses in square meters. These buildings have open windows that separate the in- and outside merely with a mosquito net. A cloth dancing in the wind, functioning as a door, diminishes this separation even more. A big and aged mango tree who casts a more than welcome shadow on his visible roots provides a place during the bright Sun's hours for the dog to close her eyes. Although the Sun burns, he is never spoken of negatively. He is embraced by the ones who garden, as his powers collaborating in the photosynthesis are fuelling the plants to grow, together with the co-operation of the praised rain which at times floods the garden and make the plants work to absorb her liquid gift.

Next to the dog the *curanderos*' garden hosts more domesticated animals, like cats, chickens, ducks, rabbits, turtles and more unknown species to me as tapirs and monkeys. These animals eat, next what they can scavenge in the garden, what is on the humans' plate and have been given names. Some of these names are given by the plants in a ceremony, like 'Felipe' for the duck who is one of the co-living species of Karina, Julio and Flor. The animals have become active and care-taking actors through the roles they are ascribed to by their co-living humans and plants. Felipe, for example [video 4], saved me and Julio from a gorilla and his spirit in a ceremony. Some of them are interested in what the plants have to say. *Curandero* Alex'

cats who are frolicking for a place on my lap are interested in Ayahuasca, they lick a minim of the liquid, find themselves a comfortable place to fall asleep and start interacting with the spirit of the plant. *Curandera* Monica tells me how her tapir loves Tabacco and participates in the ceremony, being next to her when she smokes her pipe. Feral animals who visit to spread love or take care of us from above, are welcomed with songs[7] to celebrate their presence, while others like the tarantula and snake are removed with care from the campus.

Going through the gate means entering a world of species, human and non-human selves, but also opening up to the parallel invisible. Energies and spirits roam around the garden, who are attracted or deflected by smells and sounds. The decaying leaf on a plant shows his absorption of negative energy, cleaning the garden. The bodily form of the neighbour's dog starts running when chased by other bodies as his spirit is unwanted here, like the neighbour himself whose presence is cut-off by a newly built fence. Other spirits who enter the garden seeking for help, are assisted to release them from their negative energy.

Living amongst other entities opens up a world where there is a recognition for the option that 'seeing, representing and perhaps knowing, even thinking are not exclusively human affairs' (Kohn 2013: 1). The thought that humans are more equal than different to other species might change this image and gives space to re-think about what we know about 'humanity' (Viveiros De Castro 2012: 32). By not only studying the human species but also other natural occurrences who shape this world, we can step beyond an anthropocentric view and 'appreciate how the human is also the product of that which lies beyond human contexts' (Kohn 2013: 15). Kohn's concept of an 'anthropology of life' questions the anthropocentric claim that only humans have this epistemological perk, and are the prodigies of knowing (2015: 6). He states that by engaging with this moderately other form of conducting anthropology, we have to engage with methods that foreground 'amplification over […] comparison or reduction' (Kohn 2013: 22), which can open up other ways of thinking and understanding which might result in an improvement of quality of life and co-existence amongst and for all the lifeforms that enrich this earth.

The *curanderos*' garden is rich in natural entities where the human is embedded in, along with other entities. From the multinaturalism perspective, every subject – human or non-

[7] *Icaro for the Colibri* as sung by Karina Menacho Rodriguez [audio 5]
*Icaro* for the Eagle as sung by Julio Apaestugui Escobar [audio 6]

human – sees itself as a self, an 'I' who performs actions. This worldview opens up to see a plant drinking water from the soil around his roots, breathing gas from his surroundings, and absorbing sunlight, as a human drinking a nutritious orange juice with her breakfast (Kohn 2015: 318). By acknowledging that other species and thereby spirits own an 'I'-perspective and possess personhood, they not only obtain agency but can also become conversation partners in the spirit world.

There is another framework in which plants can turn into social agents, as described by Gell (1998). This framework is relational, where it does not matter whether the plant or her spirit becomes an 'I', but that she becomes an agent through an 'actual agent' (Gell 1998: 123), namely the human. My critic towards Gell (1998)'s statement is the underlying assumption that plants cannot be considered 'actual agents'. The advantage of multinaturalism to understand human-plant communication, I learned, is that there is a communality, plants become 'us' in the spirit realm, and are family and the relation is thereby close and caring in a mutual way.

Although Ayahuasca and the customs around her sometimes are portrayed as extraordinary experiences, for my interlocutors it could as well be a family visit to highly-respected non-human family members. In the film *Entre las Plantas* Karina explains the audience how she sings towards the plants so they will come to her, to help and heal. One specific *icaro* Karina sings is the one of the *maninkari*[8]. Weiss (1972: 159) notices that in the *Asháninka* culture the *maninkari* are the good spirits, who represent plants and animals. *Maninkari* literally means 'those who are hidden', and they can be called upon and revealed through the interaction with Tabacco and Ayahuasca. Next to that, these spirits are also *Asháninka*, which can be translated to 'our fellows', and are the ancestors who are bounded by kinship (Weiss 1972: 159). Humans might have different containers as plants, but approaching our commonalities, as spiritual beings, as selves, as family-members makes the threshold to communicate with them smaller.

*Curandero* Julio once told me that everything communicates and thereby teaches:

> 'Touch the tree and you will know his structure; eat a fruit and you will know her taste'.

All our sensing abilities are useful to understand what is communicated by others. When I first thought of communication I had merely the most basic and classical scheme in my framework, with a sender, a message, an

[8] *Icaro* of the *maninkari* as sung by Karina Menacho Rodriguez [audio 7]

interpretation and a receiver. The one sends, the other receives. After I had wrestled with the concept, it became clear to me that all species are constantly communicating towards their own and other species. A baby cries to communicate her need for food, warmth or her mother's heartbeat. A cat teaches you how to take a break by napping multiple times a day or communicates his wishes for attention by jumping on your lap(top).

Communication with plants is a bit different and this might be why, when we talk about interspecies communication, research is mostly related towards human-animal relations. Plants communicate in their own particular way because their bodies, colours, structure and forms convey information. A dried leaf of Tabacco, brown and wrinkled, tells he is ready to be smoked and invites to connect to his spirit. The form of *huancavisacha*, a heart-shaped plant, has next to his use for purgatory properties, a clear message according to some of my interlocutors: he 'heals the heart'. The form of the plants sends a message towards their human-interpreter who decodes this sensorial language and proposes their abilities. I described Tsing's notion on that our worlds get shaped through interaction (2015: 27), in this case, I had yet to be contaminated through encounters with humans and non-humans in the *curanderos*' garden to understand and decode the different forms of communication the plant-teachers were conveying.

In the next chapter I describe the transformation I had to undergo, to contaminate myself inside the garden and retain from contamination outside the garden, to be able to receive from the plant-teachers.

*'And just as nature is the result not of creation but of transformation, so culture is a product not of invention but of transference (and thus transmission, tradition). In Amerindian mythology, the origin of cultural implements or institutions is canonically explained as a borrowing—a transfer (violent or friendly, by stealing or by learning, as a trophy or as a gift) of prototypes already possessed by animals, spirits, or enemies. The origin and essence of culture is acculturation"*

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2005: 477)

**Mother's Prerequisites**

As apprentice and as anthropologist I could not simple 'learn' the new culture I was situated in but had to undergo a 'transformation of [my] own world' (Wagner 1981: 17). This transformation started from the moment I entered the garden. In the early morning my guides first gave me a plant to drink, to purge, as seen in the film *Entre las Plantas*. Other families drank different plants for the so-called *vomitivos* that fulfilled the same purpose: to clean the stomach to be able to better concentrate in the ceremony. I transformed through purging. My first session took me six hours and a whole day of dizziness. According to my interlocutors the dizziness was because of my lack of faith in the plants. Even though my guides reminded repetitively to have faith towards the plant and ask him to heal and cure me, I repeatedly asked for this with my eyes closed in hope he would help me and not leave me sick like the first time. Through multiple sessions I understood how these sessions could be less uncomfortable, by concentrating and proposing my intentions towards the plant.

My first guide told me to remove my two ear-piercings which I had never taken out since they were pierced. I got informed that the plants do not like jewellery or shiny objects in ceremony. With some tools we managed to get rid of my piercings which were removed from my ear and memory quite fast. I was willing to change, to be able to comply towards the plants protocol, to elevate this plant giving it a V.I.P. (Very Important Plant) status. She demanded of me not to engage with other plants but at this moment I could only receive this information through the *curanderos* as I had not received messages from her myself. Especially mentioned as concurrency was a plant Marijuana, a plant originating from Asia but imported from Europe, who has been cultivated in the Amazon for textiles and rope during colonial times (History.com Editors 2019 [2017]). Marijuana is one of the plants, that should be avoided at all times as her spirit has jealous characteristics and tries to claim humans engaging with her according to my interlocutors.

Contamination from other plants but also other humans outside the garden, meaning physical and non-physical contact towards 'others' and objects had to be abandoned, I was asked to turn off my phone and put it far away into my backpack next to the piercings.

My visits to multiple *curanderos* meant variations on the diet. In terms of food this entailed renouncing salt, added sugar, spices, strong flavours, red meat, oil, fat, fried food, acidic flavours, garlic, alcoholic beverages, piscivore and carnivore fish. I ate from the same pot as my guides, except for one aged *curandero* as he stated that the plants had liberated him from his food-restrictions due to his experience. Some *curanderos* ate a variety of foods during a meal and varied their diet over the day, stating that a lot can be eaten but just with very little amounts. On the plate were cooked soups with vegetables, potatoes, bananas, rice, fruit salads and sometimes tooth-less fish like the waterplant-eating *boquichico* prepared on fire. Others ate food solely containing rice tomatoes and cooked eggs repetitiously for days. The meals I ate were non-distractive, pure or plain foods without enhancement as she does not see this kind of food as concurrency according to my interlocutors.

When I asked Mikaela why sexual contact is prohibited some days before and after the ceremony, she answered 'the plants don't like the smell of sex'. The plants are sensitive to smells and Tabacco, *Palo santo* and *Agua florida* or other perfumes are tools to please the spirits of the plants to attract them to establish communication.

As a teacher, plants can be strict and might punish or reject their student for not obeying or abandoning the protocol resulting in physical[9] or mental problems[10] – she might even kill (Beyer 2009: 99). Once a diet has been started it must be done with discipline and completed as a whole. An early break in the contract can offend the plant which might result in adverse consequences.

It takes time and practice with the plants before they decide to start communicating with the committing human. By concentrating and privileging one plant per diet, the human might receive her teachings

[9] Zora, an apprentice from Europe, visited the Ucayali region four years ago for the first time. She had been looking for over 20 years in Europe to cure her eczema skin-problem. She shared that she was punished by the plant in the first year of her apprenticeship when she disobeyed the plant's prerequisites by having sexual contact. Instead of her regular symptoms of eczema, another skin-characteristic appeared and her whole body was filled with white spots.

[10] A participant in ceremony had drank three cups of Ayahuasca in a row without the proper preparations. As a consequence he remained confused and wearing his spouses underwear over his head for a week according to my interlocutors.

and is able to understand how she functions on her own terms.

I had listened and accustomed myself towards the plants demands communicated through the *curanderos*' voice. So far I had not had the direct communication with her but always through a human. In the following chapter I meet the spirits of the non-human entities the *curanderos* had told me about.

*'The individual knows, to some extent, what to expect, the experience that is to come is never completely idiosyncratic, one must and has often before hand learned to have the appropriate experiences […]. One knows, for example, in the case of Ayahuasca, that the experience will be private, that it will involve encounters with entities, that demons will be present, coming either from outside of, or from within the individual'*

Stuveback (2015: 42)

**A Space of Selves and Spirits**

Dobkin De Rios (1972) writes down how after a couple of months the stories of her interlocutors' Ayahuasca visions became repetitious as she heard the stories of appearing jungle animals, like boa constrictors and viperous snakes, repeatedly.

During my fieldwork I started learning who were good spirits and who were unwanted. It depended on the *curandero*'s framework, though, who were welcome and who were desirable. By participating in ceremonies with multiple *curanderos* I had seen a wide variety of spirits and experienced contradictions in what entities 'should' be seen in ceremony and what they meant.

The vision of the snake is for some believed to be the mother spirit of Ayahuasca and a protective guardian who watches and protects the use of the plant (Dobkin De Rios 1972: 117-118). I had experienced her motherly-loving and caring character myself during the visual information I was receiving in a ceremony, when I was laying in foetus position asleep on a gigantic snake. She had been a sign of consolation as my experiences in that ceremony had been dark and difficult. In the interviews before and after ceremony with *Shipiba* Mikaela the Anaconda was mentioned and her character pro-claimed. In other ceremonies with the family from the *Asháninka* culture, portrayed in the film *Entre las Plantas,* snakes appeared as well but they were not welcome as they are considered creatures from the earth below. Flying guardians like the Eagle, who takes care and overviews from the sky, came to protect me from this now vicious creature.

Stuveback states that in order to put the experiences into context it must be noted that 'experiencing and interpreting experience is never done in a vacuum' (2015: 35). Because of the restrictions prescribed by the plants I had to retain from contamination from outside of the garden and thereby was to be contaminated with the human and non-human selves and their roles inside of the *curanderos'* garden.

Ángel, a *curandero* from the *Cocama* culture, had not talked about snakes, eagles or other animals but during our talks he repeatedly

spoke - next to the plants - of God, Jesus Christ and the ancestors who helped him in ceremony to heal and help his patients. He would talk about *los geniales,* the great ones, ancestors who look down on us from the sky and help us. After I learned about *los geniales*, I met them in ceremony: friendly and familiar-looking as if I had already known them and as if they had always existed. Mesmerized by their presence I forgot to interact with them.

Even though every ceremony was unique in its own way, I had taken over a framework from the *curanderos* I was learning from. My experiences had been coloured through the talks we had and the time we spent together. I did not meet *los geniales* when in ceremony with Flor, Karina and Julio, and Mikaela. I did not meet eagles when in ceremony with Mikaela and Ángel. I met the entities who they were talking about over and over again. And even though the contents of the frameworks where different between each *curandero*, the structure that the framework contained good and bad spirits was alike.

These frameworks that had been evolved through communication and contamination by humans and non-humans and their collaboration is highly functional in my perspective. These entities who were present had their function: some came to terrify you, in order to teach you to be strong, others made you purge, to help you clean your body and others came to consult you to gain clarity over past, present and future situations. I felt that in the *curanderos*' gardens the knowledge of humans was limited and thereby the plants and other non-humans could provide complementary teachings and support.

Like life it contained moments of ups and downs, some ceremonies were filled with darkness and especially the first ones sometimes remained in the darkness. These dark experiences entailed, for example, that I was surrounded by aggressive snakes or eaten by feline creatures. In the dark and my discomfort, I learned to confront the dark, to 'be strong'. A *curandero* had communicated to me that this is what the plant teaches, that she makes you a strong person by challenging you. His ceremonies were challenging even after more experience with ingesting Ayahuasca. It felt that the *curandero*, his brew of Ayahuasca and her teachings were testing me on how much I could handle. He did not reach out to help like Julio and Felipe would do, as presented in the film *Entre las Plantas,* but he left me in dirty water, while being surrounded with unwanted spirits. On the contrary Julio, Karina and Flor's Ayahuasca would most of the times be a loving mother who would teach me to focus on the light, collaborate with family members around me and ask them for help when needed. What the

plant teaches seemed to be very specific to each *curandero*.

Even within one culture some information that the plant brings forth has different meanings. When I shared excitingly that I saw an owl, my *Asháninka* guide replied: 'an owl is a creature lurking in the night, just looking around, it does not fly', whereas another *Asháninka curandero* pro-claimed her to be a wise creature who has good eyes that can see in the dark and who helps to solve problems. I could see that there are clear cultural meanings as some animals such as colibris, leopards and eagles were seen by all *Asháninkas* and *Shipibos* as positive spirits. I noticed that in the case of spirits who are not repeatedly mentioned over generations and thereby do not have clear signification in the *curandero*'s framework, the entities' meaning changes from garden to garden.

Noll et al. (1985: 449) note that history writers do not always acknowledge cultural change, whereas in fact cultural mythology is alive and changing. There is, for example, a variety in guardians who different *curanderos* possess, like animals, mermaids, Jesus Christ and bombing warplanes (Luna 1982: 143). My appearance in the *curanderos*' garden had not only broadened my world but also theirs as I had brought in entities that they had not encountered before. I told them about meeting a phoenix, a dragon and a lion. After a ceremony I laid in bed awake with eyes wide open with the plant still active communicating with me. A head of a lion appeared very close to my face; his colourful manes seemed never ending slowly dancing covered me as a blanket. I felt comfortable in his presence and, whereas other entities had come and gone more rapidly, the lion was staying with me until I fell asleep. The next day I had drawn the lion and presented him to my interlocutors, I had told them how I felt connected to the animal as he was watching over me giving me a feeling of alliance. Like with the other animals or entities I had brought forward who were unknown to them, they did not go into what they meant or asked further. I felt that my allies did not have the same meanings as theirs.

I notice I had taken over the framework of protective and unfavourable entities. Through time and experience the communication with the plant in ceremony became clearer. Through encouragement of the *curanderos* I dared to ask her and she would answer by showing me images, speaking to me in my own language with a warm feminine voice, not always communicating a clear-cut answer but at least spin my thoughts and made me in a relative short time go through a rollercoaster of emotions, and showing me perspectives in past, current and future events. I felt she was talking to me in a

metaphoric language in which loved ones could become flamingos, lions or other colourful creatures. 'The healing is personal' had multiple *curanderos* pro-claimed at the beginning of a ceremony and it empowered me to give my own meaning to my experiences. Ayahuasca unexpectedly came up with topics that were outside of the *curandero*'s framework like my ADD-diagnosis. She advised me to discard this label as it was not serving me, and again I let a plant-teacher influence to accept my 'new' self.

As some experiences seem clear other occurrences remain ambiguous. My body had been communicating with me for over a week by giving me stomach-aches. In ceremony Karina directed me to concentrate and to ask Ayahuasca what the cause of the stomach-ache was. I followed her instructions and the dark of my eyelids transformed into colours, into a dark blue sky which transformed to dark red and eventually there appeared a white round light as If I was looking through a microscope. I sat right up as I knew a teaching might come soon. A little dark spot appeared in the light and the lens on the microscope started to zoom in. The dot I now saw up close was alive with about ten little legs moving rapidly around its big body. Parasites? Although I had no clue what they looked like, it looked a bit like a tick, which I was well-acquainted with from walking in Dutch forests, only its body was bigger. Although the information was quite clear that some kind of creature was inside my stomach causing the harm, I did not trust my own vision. What if I am just making up my own imagination of what it could be? To have trust and faith in the plants are words that have been recurring in my fieldwork: 'if you do not have trust or no faith into the medicine, into the plants, they will not teach you'. Based on an evidence-based framework I might have refused to have trust and faith in my communication with Ayahuasca. 'Parasites', Karina said, and Julio answered, 'I saw them too'. My heart skipped a beat. Who or what was communicating with me was at least not solely my own consciousness. I shared with them I had seen them as well. Until now, I remain wondered about our communal experience of receiving the same information. Karina tells me she will make a drink for me the following morning to counter the parasites. Karina and Julio remained timid over the fact we all saw the same, for me it was extraordinary, for them it is daily life.

*Sometimes communication raises more questions: 'Why did a lion came to visit me?'*
*illustration by author*

**Conclusion**

In my search to be able to understand what it means to have alliance and communicate with a non-human species, I have taken on the multinaturalism perspective that is present in some Amazonian Indigenous cultures. In this perspective, human, animal and plant have a commonality by having a spirit, being an 'I'. Our bodies may differ but as spiritual beings we have unity and thereby our spirits are able to communicate with one another. This spiritual unity can make those who have a spirit into relatives and social agents to collaborate with.

In the *curanderos'* garden I encountered a diversity of selves, humans, plants, animals and spirits who interact and influence one another through their assigned social roles. As the *curanderos* retained themselves from unwanted contamination, I have been open to let myself be contaminated to experience interspecies communication. Inside the garden I took over the *curanderos*' frameworks and their experience about what the plants teach and what entities occur in the ceremonies (which was different from garden to garden).

During my fieldwork I have experienced the communication with plants through visions and sounds in the ceremony, plants' shapes and through divination practices, some of which are presented in the film *Entre las Plantas*. These experiences shaped my concept of communication as a constant flow of messages between human and non-human. During my fieldwork, plants became my teachers from whom I received teachings under the *curanderos*' guidance. In my fieldwork I got introduced to a framework of question and answer, where the human could ask the non-human. I noticed that in practice the multinaturalism perspective became most clear to me in the ceremonies where we drank Ayahuasca to be able to communicate with spirits. Here, I had to transform myself into a spirit and communicated with other spirits in a language that was personal, multi-sensory, and metaphorical.

Based on an evidence-based framework, I was on the brink of explaining that the teachings I received from the plants could not have been contaminated only by the *curanderos* - such as when the plant taught me to take agency again over a diagnosis I had been labelled with (the *curanderos* were not aware of my diagnosis and we had not spoken a word about it), when I realized that when centering the Indigenous ontology and epistemology there is no need to prove that plants have 'intelligence and animacy' (Dev 2018: 198). It was enough that I experienced her alliance

under guidance of my guides calling upon her spirit in ceremony for the communication with the plant-teacher to be 'real' and her teachings to be 'true'.

Although I tried to block myself from contamination, I have been contaminated, for example by literature I have read before going in the field which at times talks about 'wonder' and 'magic' (Beyer 2009: 476-477). In this text and in the film I have tried to refrain from exoticizing. Nevertheless, some happenings still remain miraculous to me after my fieldwork. The plant had shown me and the *curanderos* what was happening in my body, there was a synchronicity in what Ayahuasca communicated during ceremony between the *curanderos* and me. These kinds of happenings are beyond the explainable at this point through a former way of conducting science. When we come to see research as a ceremony as well, a ritual situated in its own cultural context (Wilson 2008), we give ourself the agency to see beyond our framework, and open up to other frameworks. In my research I have taken on Indigenous knowledge, which I needed to help understand how humans and non-humans collaborate and shape worlds together as my interlocutors experience it.

This thesis attempted to bridge the fabricated 'divide' between human and nature by describing my experiences in the *curanderos*' garden – a space where selves and spirits meet – and taking on Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in this research ceremony. My experiences, taking you with me wandering through these gardens, might bring for you, as the reader, some expectations, and contaminate your thoughts. Our surroundings and that what others 'feed' us have an impact. Perhaps, after reading this thesis, when the leaves of the plant in your windowsill start to hang, this does not mean to you that she is deprived of $H_2O$, but that your roommate communicates to you that she is thirsty.

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**Terminology**

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i Shaman

The origin of the word 'shaman' stems from *Tungusian* tribes, who are native to Siberia and Northeast Asia. Explorers and conquerors have taken this term towards Europe from where it spread further (Laufer 1917: 361). As social scientists, our words weigh heavily and we must thereby be thoughtful of our word choices. We must give attention to the call for Amazonian, *Mestizo* and Indigenous working with plant-teachers not to be reduced to 'shaman' or conformed to this 'made-up, modern, western category' (Taussig 1989: 59). Indigenous communities state that this categorization does 'not apply historically to the particularities of [their] culture' (Shipibo Conibo Center of New York 2018). More specific, some *Shipibo* have stated to prefer *onanya* (Shipibo Conibo Center of New York 2020) instead of 'shaman', and through personal communication I found out that *Asháninka* mostly use the term *sheripiari* for a male healer and *sheripiaro* for a female healer. I will hereby apply a more neutral, and agreed on by my interlocutors, term of *curandero*, to give attention to this request and to be able to give structure to this thesis by using one term instead of different local ones.

I noticed that the term is still used, mostly by tourists' requests for a 'shaman', and touristic Ayahuasca enterprices' reply by using this popular term. But also museums use it such as Museum Volkenkunde's exhibition *Helende kracht* (2019), which exhibited amongst other topics Ayahuasca and the cultures around her.

ii Exploitation of Indigenous people and their knowledge

Two of my interlocutors have told me about their former work in Ayahuasca centres. Next to conducting the ceremonies and preparing the Ayahuasca brew they had been responsible for cleaning and cooking food for the clients. After a ceremony, which sometimes could last until 04:00 o'clock in the night they had to wake up at 6:00 in the morning to continue working, preparing breakfast for the clients. They would earn 80 soles which is $23. Clients would pay easily around $1000 for a week at this specific healing centre, which hosts on average around six clients at a time.

iii *Icaros*

*Icaros* are taught by the plant-teacher to the *curandero*. *Icaros* are described by Luna (1984: 148) as magical melodies or songs. He emphasizes on the importance of their role for *curanderos* as the *icaros* are indicators of their power and knowledge. 'There are thousands of *icaros*, and [*curanderos*] assert their prestige depending on how many they have in their repertoire' (Beyer 2009: 127). The plant-teachers present these *icaros* to the *curanderos* as an individual gift of the spirits but sometimes it happens that it can be transmitted to a pupil. Beyer (2009: 129) sums the functions of the *icaros* up into three core functions: 1) call spirits, 2) 'cure' objects and enrich them with magical powers, 3) control the hallucinations received. *Icaros* are a shared language between plants and humans. As some *curanderos* might sing out-loud as they do not mind sharing what they know, other *curanderos* mumble their *icaros* as other *curanderos* might steal them (Beyer 2009: 125).