

## *Sound – Trance – Healing - The sound and pattern medicine of the Shipibo in the Amazon lowlands of Peru*

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Rittner, S. (2007) Sound – Trance – Healing - The sound and pattern medicine of the Shipibo in the Amazon lowlands of Peru. *Music Therapy Today* (Online 18th July) Vol.VIII (2) 196-235.

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### *Introduction*

In the year 2005 I spent several months with the Shipibo tribe in the Amazon lowlands in the east of Peru for a field research project. I was a guest in three different villages where I worked with a total of ten shamans and participated in their nocturnal healing rituals, followed by extensive interviews. After decades of studies into the “agent voice”, that is, the question what really induces change when people sing, I welcomed the opportunity to contact highly specialised experiential experts in this field, healing experts from other cultures, and to get immediate and personal experience of their work.

The following research questions in particular induced me to embark upon this demanding and not quite harmless excursion after intensive preparation: How do the Shipibo shamans heal with Ayahuasca (a psychoactive substance), with Icaros (specific songs) and patterns (visionary structures)? And what is their subjective description of the healing

effects? In an attempt to find answers I shall quote from my field research notes and from semi-structured interviews, mainly from talks with Juan, an elderly and experienced Shipibo master shaman. In doing so I am aware that it is almost impossible to correctly reflect interviews with members of a traditionally oral culture in written form or translations into western modes of thinking.

Despite all changes that my presence naturally caused in the everyday life of a Shipibo village, my central research approach was non-invasive; I tried to be cautious, to give much time, to suggest, to wait, to let things happen, not demanding, not having to achieve something, to wait again and again and be content with not knowing. This basic attitude, this rather indirect approach turned out to be the right idea. After surprisingly short time I met with much openness, warmth and willingness to help, was accepted into their private lives and was passed on from village to village within the family. It took some time to understand that my cautious and reserved attitude corresponded to their own mentality and ethnic concepts. They are rather weary, reticent, highly cultivated, sensitive and unobtrusive in their behaviour.

The Shipibo call healing experts not shamans but ‘*medicos*’ or ‘*ayahuasqueros*’, and in rare cases, when someone has reached the highest level of shamanistic healing powers, ‘*muráya*’, this is a special kind of master shaman. Of these, there are less than a handful left among the Shipibo. There is a belief that this part of the world still has the highest rate of shamans; but the number of experienced old shamans with their traditional training over a number of years is declining rapidly. One reason is the popularization (also in Peru) and commercialization of shaman tourism that leads to an inflationary increase of self-appointed shamans with insufficient training or no training at all. A village that still has an old and experienced shaman and several of his disciples today is seen as

‘healthy’, as socially intact and stable. With the death of every shaman, an entire oral library is lost. Some of them still know the effects of 2000 to 3000 different plants, have tried these effects in self-experiments during their rigid and perilous training and have incorporated their energetic healing powers.

### *The Shipibo*

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Approximately 30.000 Shipibo live in the tropical lowlands of the Amazon river in Peru, east of the Andes, in about one hundred villages and many isolated farmsteads along the upper part of the Ucayalli river and its tributaries. The loamy waters of the Rio Ucayalli come down from the Andes and form one of the two mayor sources of the Amazon. Ethnologists today speak of the ‘Shipibo-Conibo-Shetebo’, meaning tribes originally conquered by the Shipibo that became assimilated and are now almost indistinguishable as to language and culture, so that they are covered by one ethnic term. For the sake of simplicity I shall use the term Shipibo throughout this article. Their language is Shipibo which, however, increasingly mixes with the Lorettano Spanish of the conquerors and the mestizo immigrants specifically among the middle and young generations. In the past the Shipibo probably had books with hieroglyph-like signs that were unique in the Amazon region, based on an oral tradition over thousands of years (compare Andritzky, 1999a, p.234-235). But these were destroyed through excesses of missionary zeal and more recently were replaced by a written latinized version of Shipibo that is now taught in the bilingual village schools.

Traditionally the Shipibo live on plants, fishing and hunting. In their gardens they grow maniok, bananas, and sweet potatoes, they harvest mangos, papayas and other fruit. Around cities such resources have dwindled

so that the Shipibo depend on money exclusively. Men support their families of ten to fifteen with occasional jobs in the woodworking industry. Young men have discovered that shaman work is one of the few well-paid sources of extra income. Women have become the main bread-winners selling exceptionally pretty handicraft.

**FIGURE 1. The pattern art of Shipibo women**

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**FIGURE 2. Dressed up for festivities**

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**FIGURE 3. Shipibo women are famous for their ceramics – Chomo, Collection of the Tübingen Ethnology Museum**

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**FIGURE 4. Chomo: Vessel for fermentation of maniok beer, still hot from firing**

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The Shipibo are mainly known for their art of pottery and geometric-linear decorative style. They identify with this sophisticated art of patterns and take pride in them as a very specific expression of refinement that distinguishes them from neighbour tribes. The self-given name Shipibo means “the true people”. In former times, almost all objects in Shipibo and Conibo villages were decorated with patterns. The entire equipment of farmsteads was covered with geometrical patterns: carved, braided, knitted, woven, embroidered and painted. Every single beam of the house, the artfully woven leaves covering the ceiling, the box-like sleep-

ing tents made of cotton, the boats and paddles, kitchen and hunting utensils – everything was fully decorated. The woven robes of fine cotton for men and women, even faces, hands and legs showed the characteristic ornaments. Old songs describe the beauty of those farmsteads in detail. In their traditional dances people followed patterns, too. Today the Shipibo increasingly prefer fabricated objects of plastic, aluminum and chemical fibres, so that the traditional art of patterns is now limited to a few remaining crafts (from: Gebhard-Sayer/Illius, 1991).

**FIGURE 5. Huisna and husband in festive robes with quénpo drinking cups**

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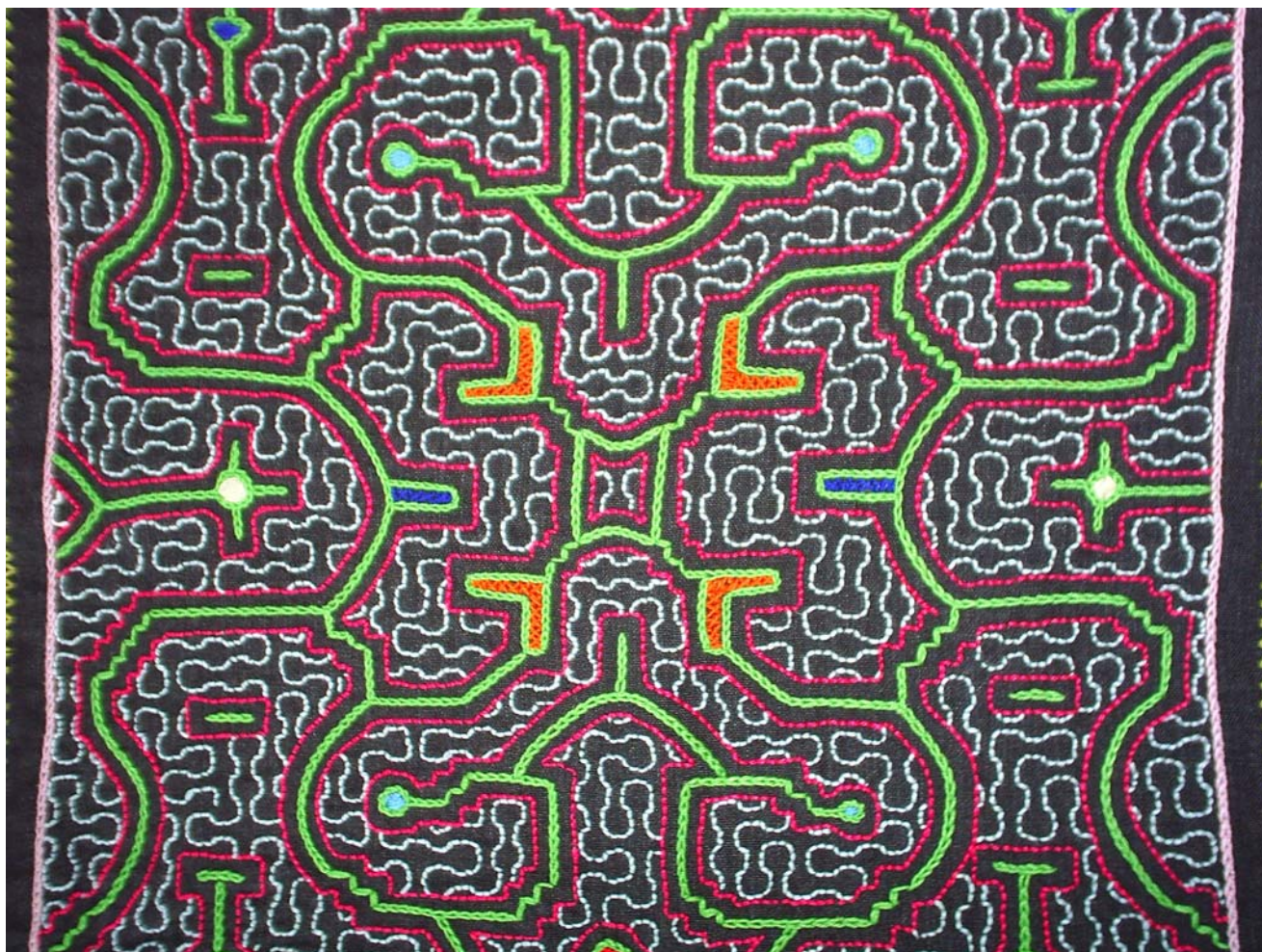
**FIGURE 6. Geometrical patterns decorate the walls of some huts covered with palm leaves**

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**FIGURE 7. Shipibo women make visionary energy patterns visible in this world**

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### *Ayahuasca*

The Shipibo shamans use a hallucinogenic substance to enter an altered state of consciousness that provides ‘vision’ in nocturnal rituals, in the deep darkness of the resounding jungle night: they ‘travel’ with the support of the ‘spirit of the ayahuasca’. In this state they have the power to heal. Their foremost healing tools are ‘Icaros’, specific traditional songs that are nevertheless recreated in the moment of treatment. With the help

of these songs they penetrate the energetic pattern of a patient, comparable to a surgery tool, with the intention to clean and purify from harmful dark mist, or *nihue*. (Rittner, 2006b, p.28)

Ayahuasca (Quechua: ‘tendrils of the soul’) is produced in all tropical regions of South America for ritual purposes and today constitutes an important source of income. The liquid psychoactive substance has many names and is available in a variety of compositions. But the basis is always the Camarampi tendril (Malpighiaceae *Banisteriopsis Caapi*), which is also called ‘la purga’ (the purging) or ‘liana of death’. It contains the beta-carbolines harmine, harmalin and tetrahydroharmine. In addition the leaves of the Chacruna (which is a kind of rubiaceae: *Psychotria viridis*) are required to produce the desired hallucinogenic effect. These leaves contain the very strong psychoactive substance DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine). The hallucinogenic drink is produced by boiling chacruna leaves with battered ayahuasca liane pieces in a pot of water over many hours. Consumption of ayahuasca sharpens sensory perceptions in all dimensions of reality and supports synaesthetic experience as well as telepathic ‘vision’. Hallucinations at all sensory levels (visions, auditions, gustations etc.) are possible.

**FIGURE 8. (removed due to copyright restrictions )**

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The Shipibo call the visionary altered state of consciousness of trance ‘la concentración’. The open hut with a palm leave roof where nocturnal healing sessions take place is called ‘la casa de la concentración’. In contrast to other tribes, the Shipibo have a simple, almost puristic and unspectacular approach to the use of ayahuasca for healing purposes. Traditionally they hold the strict belief that patients are not permitted to

use ayahuasca. Control of visions is of essential importance for the shaman. Most of those who work in this business with mestizos and whites in order to make money today do no longer adhere to this rule. An experienced healer told me:

‘An ayahuasquero can only accompany one or two persons maximum who take ayahuasca and guide their visions and keep control. Ayahuasca groups with forty people that take place in tourist lodges in the jungle and also in seminary centers in the west are madness.’ (R./Y.)

Shipibo women traditionally do not drink ayahuasca. But every shaman needs his female partner for support in the nocturnal healing ritual. She keeps smoking mapacho, the strong jungle tobacco with the spirit of the tobacco plant to protect him from attacks of dangerous spirits. Tobacco is seen as the ‘child of the ayahuasca’. A shaman told me:

‘Without my woman the tabaquera I cannot work. She is most important, she protects my back!’ (J.R./S.C.)

**FIGURE 9. Shipobo shaman with his woman the tabaquera**

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*Concept of health and illness:*

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Illness always comes from an imbalance between the everyday reality and the world of spirits, the ‘other reality’. A shaman is able to navigate and to act deliberately in the visionary state of the nocturnal Ayahuasca ritual and thus to balance conflicting powers by fighting with spirits and redirecting forces into a harmonic order. He treats illnesses ranging from minor complaints up to most serious physical diseases and infections but also social conflicts, intimate wishes and desires in wooing, and many other things. Only about one third of all treatments concern illness that a traditional western physician would see as needing treatment. The by far larger number of reasons for shaman treatment are sociosomatic, that is

they involve an impairment of the patient's social identity (compare Illius, 1987, P.95-06, p.104).

The three main diagnoses summing up all illnesses known to western medicine are:

- mal aire = bad energy, bad influence that may stem from past experience and sometimes rises from the mud under the river water as 'bad air'
- susto = fright, trauma, shock, for example a sudden threatening event or accident
- daño = curse, bad wish, mainly caused by negative powers sent from a brujo, a sorcerer or hostile shaman.

The Shipibo shaman assumes full responsibility for a patient's life and well-being of the entire community. At the same time he never heals in isolation, but all members of the village community contribute to a patient's recovery by what they do or fail to do. They ensure that he is surrounded by positive sensory impressions, pleasant smells and colours, harmonic patterns, by persons with pure thoughts, that he receives pure food, and that couples who had sex or menstruating women do not pass his home (compare Gebhard-Sayer, 1987).

Juan, an old shaman, told me:

'When you consult your doctors and they disconcert you at the beginning by explaining all treatment risks in detail and do not give you hope, then this makes the problem worse. A belief in recovery is essential for healing!' (J.R./S.C.)

In his opinion healing occurs in small steps only and with the patient's cooperation and discipline. The patient may have to stick to a diet for some time. If he does not comply then this might bring complications and setbacks, which require further but far more dangerous rituals. This is what Juan does not like at all since this means more strenuous and complicated work for him.

‘Unsuccessful treatments are not seen as a shaman’s mistake or failure. They only mean that the ‘brujo’ who caused the illness has more *shinan* (vital energy) and more powerful *yonshibo* (spirit helpers) than the healer’ (Illius, 1987, p.54).

### *An ayahuasca ritual*

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What is a nocturnal Shipibo *ceremonia* like?

#### **1. ARRIVAL**

When darkness falls the ayahuasquero, his woman the tabaquera, and sometimes family members and his disciples meet in the shaman hut prior to the ritual. They talk and get into the spirit of the event. Then one or two patients arrive, in most cases accompanied by relatives. Greetings and good wishes are expressed that the ritual may succeed and have positive effects for all involved. The patient’s problem is described with a minimum of words. The shaman does not want to hear details and long-winded explanations, he relies on his diagnostic ‘visionary powers’. If the patient is a villager, the shaman is well aware of the systemic causes of his problem. Meanwhile, darkness has come.

**FIGURE 10. The old master shaman Juan**

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**2. BLOWING ON THE HALLUCINOGENIC SUBSTANCE.**

The ayahuasquero now concentrates and blows on the open bottle with the ayahuasca liquid. The icaro, the song which he blows into the bottle whispering softly has this meaning (according to Juan):

‘He evokes the spirit of ayahuasca (*nishi ibo*) so that a light may appear and cover all involved in the ritual and protect them so that healing becomes possible.’ – ‘This means that he (the shaman) looks *down* (to the nether world) but as soon as he goes ‘shshsh’ he diagnoses prior to singing, he examines in each patient what becomes visible from his body. Then he is highly concentrated, the sound indicates that he is very concentrated.’ ‘He diagnoses, yes, he diagnoses your body.’ (J.R./S.C.)

Download audio example 1 (mp3 - 1.3 MB)

**3. INTAKE OF AYAHUASCA:**

The shaman and his assistants, with the exception of his woman, now take a large sip of the brown, viscous and very bitter substance. The kerosine light in the can is extinguished. From now on everything happens in the dark. Darkness is very important in the healing ritual since light hurts the eye and impairs ‘vision’ in the other dimension of reality. Everybody sits in silence for about half an hour until the ‘mareación’, the intoxication sets in. The healers exchange occasional murmured comments.

**4. YAWNING SONG:**

Occasional melodious yawning with distinctly audible vibrations of the lower jaw indicate that the substance starts taking effect. Juan’s son explains this ‘yawning song’ as follows:

‘It means that the powerful *mareación* (intoxication) arrives in his body and also because the power of ayahuasca falls down on his body, like a many-coloured mist, falls down in his body from the top to the bottom, then he (the shaman) feels the onset of a strong *mareación*, then it is like an earth quake, and this sounds like ‘fffiuuu!’ Then the body trembles, and when he moves the earth seems to tremble, but this is due to the strong *mareación* that is starting. I believe they (the shamans) do not feel pain, no, but it opens up more and more.’ (J.R. and J.R./S.C.)

I ask whether it is important to maintain moments of silence. ‘

Yes, the moment the *mareación* starts, yes, this is why there is this ‘fffiuuu’ in the silence sometimes. You must not speak aloud then, this is important, because you perceive everything extremely clearly, you hear voices from far away. Then it is as if everything were nearby, for example the music of last night in the next village. It is as if the music were here with us, and this is not good, it disturbs the body.’ (J.R.(S.C.)

Download audio example 2: (mp3 - 980 kb)

**5. HEALING SONGS –  
ICAROS:**

The core ritual always starts with the singing of an *icaro*, a ritual song, with which the *níshi íbo*, the ayahuasca master is evoked and asked for help. A *médico* sings:

‘Medicine, intoxicate me well!  
Help me by opening your beautiful worlds!  
You, too, were created by God  
Who created human beings,  
Who created the world:  
Your medicine worlds  
Open them up to me completely.  
I wish to heal this ailing body:  
This ailing child  
And this ailing woman  
I want to heal and make everything all right.’

(Neten Vitá in: Illius, 1987, p.55-56)

,Every healing session requires the presence and help of a group of plant and animal spirits in different compositions according to the type of illness. Always present, however, is *níshi íbo*, the ayahuasca master, because it is his energy that has been consumed. Prior to his appearance he projects bright geometrical images before the eyes of the *muráya* (master shaman) for a short moment, visions of shining ornaments that cover the entire visible nocturnal scene, they precede the *níshi íbo* like a banner. Among those present the *muráya* is the only one who can see them. Now he starts, supported by helping spirits, to decipher *kikín-quene* (geometrical patterns) from this vision and to sing them aloud. As soon as the glowing net of patterns touches his mouth and his crown, his lips produce songs that correspond to the patterns and ornaments. The song is the result of the vision of patterns, an immediate transformation from the visual to the acoustic.’ (Gebhard-Sayer, Illius, 1991).

But the shaman does by no means sing the pattern lines like notes from a music sheet.

Download audio example 3: (mp3 - 3 MB)

In their pattern art on ceramics, material and wooden objects the Shipibo women make such energy paths visible in their daily life reality. A few of them are still able to sing these patterns out today. Two Shipibo women explain:

‘The patterns are energy paths. The songs lead you along. Tortuous paths with ups and downs, like life. You can sing out these paths with German songs, too.’ (R./Y.). ‘These lines are like rivers (of life) that flow in deep valleys between mountains.’ (A./N.C.)

**FIGURE 11. Traditional patterns embroidered by Shipibo women are songs, are painted music**

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The second icaro of the night involves all participants in the ritual and asks for their well-being. After three to four more general songs the shaman asks one of the patients to come near. Then he sings very specific icaros for that person that arise from his synaesthetic perceptions, visions and auditions (acoustic hallucinations).

In the course of the treatment the shaman works directly at the patient's body where necessary. He blows tobacco smoke on the patient's body

lying in front of him. He blows on or sucks certain places, producing fine saliva bubbles, with a mixture of tobacco smoke and *agua florida* (an aromatic alcoholic flower essence). He may also press his fingers into deeper layers of the patient's belly in order to remove harmful forces.

**6. CONCLUSION AND THERAPEUTIC PRESCRIPTIONS:**

At the end of the ayahuasca ritual that may last four to five hours, the shaman grips the head of each participant with strong fingers and blows tobacco smoke over the top of the head in order to close the energy field down and for protection. (The Shipibo see the fontanel as the highly vulnerable ‘achilles’ heel’ in human beings.) Patients are given therapy prescriptions, recommendations for specific diets or behaviours or actions to avoid. Where necessary, additional healing plants may be used that the shaman gathers in the jungle and prepares by day. Applications like hot steam baths, strokes with nettles or therapeutic vomiting are part of the Shipibo medicine; some interventions are quite drastic from our western perspective.

**7. INTER-VISION:**

After patients and relatives have left the shaman hut, the group of healers continues to discuss the cases and the ritual until long after midnight and compare and analyse diagnosis and visions in detail. (This last stage may be compared to the similarly named ‘collegial intervision’ practiced in western psychotherapy). Where necessary and after difficult treatments in particular, additional songs are sung in order to relieve and purify the shaman and his assistants.

*Songs of the Spirits, Icaros*

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The songs come from the ‘invisible’, the spirits themselves. The shaman has received and learned the songs from them. Each protective spirit is associated with a specific, unique song.

‘This also means that a shaman may evoke as many protective spirits as he knows songs. The songs have immediate protective and healing effects.’ (Baer in Dittrich/Scharfetter, 1987, p.74).

The choice of songs for a healing ritual conforms to the requirements of the situation and to the songs the shaman hears from the spirits.

‘Icaros come from plants, animals, from the earth; there are icaros for a variety of purposes, but the most important ones come from the spirits in heaven.’ (Pablo Amaringo Shuña, painter and ayahuasquero, Pucallpa)

There are many different icaros. Some shamans boast of knowing and using far more than 100 different songs. Juan lists some of the many icaro types as examples:

- icaros of large trees: *de la lupuna* (the highest tree with a whole city of the most powerful spirits living on top) and *de la sunarara* (at night the tree sings in the upper layer of its bark like a hissing snake)
- icaro for the spirit of the anaconda (*ronin*) (for healing: the singing is very soft in order to convince the anaconda to give up the patient’s stolen dream soul)
- icaros of big fish (dolphin, paiche. The rose-coloured river dolphins are seen as threatening animals that may cause *daño*)
- icaros for love (*huarmi icaro*) (for magical attraction)
- icaros for a fine voice (see above)
- icaros *de los diseños* (for beautiful patterns)
- kushi-icaro (a very vigorous icaro, to be sung in a loud voice)

There are also powerful icaros that may cause harm (*daño*), or produce a curse, for example the icaro *de la anaconda muerte* (of the dead anaconda). But for each harmful song there is an even more powerful song with the opposite effect, which to know or to find is a challenge for the shaman. Generally the main function of icaros is to steer, modulate and actively influence ayahuasca visions.

‘Nishi-íbo and the other spirits present can also see, hear and sing the song at the same time, so that the *muráya* perceives the song as a chorus, and he joins in, while the villagers present only hear

the *muráya*'s lonely voice. They try to join in the *muráya*'s singing, and their voices inevitably follow with a small delay. Thus a two-sided choir emerges with the *muráya* at the visual-acoustic core. The compelling force of the leading song is directed against the spirits responsible for the illness, and these spirits are evoked and attacked in this manner. While the shaman's song hovers in the air describing lines and loops, a second transformation takes place. The song now assumes the form of a *kikín-quene* (pattern) that is visible to the *muráya* only and then settles on the patient's body with a healing effect, penetrates the body and stays there forever. Several sessions of three to four hours each are necessary to complete the healing pattern.' (Gebhard-Sayer, 1983, in Baer, 1987, p.75-76).

The powerful singing in nocturnal rituals fulfils an important social function as well.

'In remote parts of the village people hear their shaman sing. They know that his fragrant singing mingles with tobacco smoke and describes meanders in the air in order to decorate everything, but above all the patient, with wonderful healing patterns.' (Gebhard-Sayer, 1983, in Baer, 1987, p.75).

In their sleep they share the comforting knowledge that the shaman is busy reestablishing health, a balance of forces and thus harmony in the entire village.

Researchers distinguish between different types of ayahuasca songs among the Shipibo (for example *buehúa*, *mashá*, *shiro buehuá* and *icáro*); I use the general term *icaro* for all of these in my article (compare Meyer, 1974). Each *icaro* takes about 10 to 15 minutes. From the musical perspective, they have three phases:

1. individual slow melody parts, sometimes with long intervals in between, each resembling a long breathing out, at the end with audible pressure, and fading away.
2. Intensification to a strong rhythmic part, breathing in always at the same rhythmically appropriate moment, also inspiring singing. 'In his heart he (the shaman) feels very very strong in this rhythm, with much energy, yes.' (J.R./S.C.) This part of songs is for visionary battles with

spirits that are always dangerous. A *médico* says: ‘If we do not have to fight then the person we are treating is not really ill.’ (J.R./S.C.) The shaman enters this part of the ritual with his entire life force (*shinan*) at high risk to himself, he goes ‘through hell’ for the patient.

3. Each song ends with a very short melody phrase with a ritardando or deceleration.

### *The voice*

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Shipibo shamans sing in very different ways; ideally their vocal range reaches from deep bass to falsetto. The higher, more powerful and louder a shaman’s singing is, the more effective his voice is regarded. In particularly dangerous parts of the vision the shaman sometimes changes over to falsetto. For serious kinds of illness there are specific songs where the shaman pretends to be someone else. These songs have to be sung in a high female voice exclusively. They are considered most effective since the spirits believe that a woman is involved.

‘Juan has a very high voice with much volume. This is important, very much energy.’ (J.R./S.C.)

The Shipibo songs, by the way, are no ‘wellness treatment’ for patients, they are loud in most cases, often exhausting, and emotionally challenging to the listener.

Download audio example 4: (mp3 - 780 kb)

The melody of an icaro is something a shaman has to learn, either from his teacher whom he accompanies in many rituals over years. Or the melody comes directly from the spirit of various hallucinogenic plants in ‘self-experiments’ during the training phase which traditionally has periods of fasting for months of isolation in the jungle.

José, the son of the master shaman, mentions a specific song, an icaro that gives the future shaman a particularly fine voice:

‘There is an icaro that gives a fine (good) voice and very fine songs with sounds of the spirits. In these icaros there are very special spirits of music. Juan may evoke these spirits in the vision when he is in the *ceremonía*. The spirits appear, and Juan asks whether they can help somebody to become a singer. And in between the spirits bring a sombrero together with the icaro and put it on his head so that the songs, the letters may enter his head, that is the way of these icaros.’

‘The words of the first verse say that the crown is very pretty, like a king’s crown, golden, so bright and shining and very pretty and resounding, it also has a flute. In this flute there is a *picaflor* (colibri) that flies above the flute. This means that the voice, the throat, everything is going to sound like the spirit of the colibri that accompanies the flute. Then the voice gets out well, it does not sound rough but fine because it is supported by the colibri spirit, and the flute supports the throat, and the colibri is part of the mouth. Then the songs come out very well.’ (J.R./S.C.)

However, such an effect requires months of strict dieting prior to the event. Then it may happen that the spirits spontaneously put that particular *sombrero* on one’s head.

‘At night you hear auditions: noise in the head but no headache, rather like radio noises of the day. You are not allowed to go out into the sun because this is harmful to the (energy) crown installed by the spirits. You must avoid hard rain. And you are forbidden to cook during that time.’ (J.R./S.C.)

Download audio example 5: (mp3 - 2 MB)

### *The importance of song text for the healer-patient relationship and the healing process*

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For some ritual songs that are sung frequently the texts are learned, but in most cases they are improvised, created in the moment of singing.

Some of the elements the shaman uses in the impromptu creation of song texts are for example:

- ‘pacing’ and ‘leading’ (alternation between following and guiding formulations)
- with relaxation induction and reassurance
- with positive suggestions and healing images
- he takes the patient by the hand in singing and explains the cause of the illness
- he explains his visionary measures
- he offers confidence in his healing competence (*ani shinan*).

In the healing rituals most patients are treated in a recumbent position, they glide into a half-sleeping state and sometimes fall asleep. A patient rests in deep relaxation, sometimes in limbo between alertness and sleep, in the dreamlike state of the REM phases rich in theta waves, which means visionary without substance intake. This is an altered state of consciousness with healing effects, comparable for example to hypnosis or catathymic imaging in psychotherapy. In this highly suggestible and relaxed alert state the songs have specific effects on a patient. The shaman’s words help to reassure family members, involve them in the ritual, explain aspects of the illness and its causes. From our western perspective this corresponds to a family therapy approach. The therapeutic factor of the induction of a trophotropic trance (calming down the vegetative nerve system through stimulation of the parasympaticus) in an alert state, which is known to us in psychotherapy, this very important healing aspect has not been addresses in any of the detailed research reports on Shipibo culture to my knowledge (compare Rittner/Fachner, 2004).

Imagine your doctor sings to you while performing a gastroscopy, explains to you what he sees in his camera in singing and rhymes, accompanies you in your anxiety with healing suggestions and images, and guarantees complete recovery at the same time ...

### *Pattern medicine*

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What has all this to do with the ‘patterns’ of the Shipibo? Here I refer once again to the Shipibo researchers Gebhard-Sayer and Illius.

‘Every human being possesses a body pattern that is formed by his energy flow and is not visible to the average villager but to the shaman. When the competent and experienced shaman uses the plant in question, then he gets insights into a patient’s energy field and flow of life force, energetic disturbances and blockades. Shipibo shamans say that the ayahuasca drink helps them to see through a patient’s body, like x-rays. However, they see neither skeleton nor organs but rather the disturbances and blockades in energetic balance. The exact site of the illness may be located in this way. The ayahuasca plant permits shamans also to contact the spirit world. Above all the so-called ‘masters of powerful trees’ support a shaman in his therapeutic work. These patterns resemble the style of the patterns we admire on earthen vessels and textiles. But according to the shamans’ descriptions they are much finer and more complex. If a person falls ill in the course of his life this becomes visible in an imbalance, a distortion, an unclearness or agitation of his body pattern. Ayahuasca helps a shaman to see the pattern and evaluate it. He tries to reconstruct the pattern through songs transmitted to him in his ayahuasca induced state by the masters of the trees. For the Shipibo these songs are sacred and healing, they are also called ‘pattern medicine’. When a shaman sings his therapeutic song, then rhythm and intensity of the song show their effects in a patient’s body pattern. While the shaman’s healing song leaves the breath of his mouth in a linear and rhythmic flow, it forms a fine pattern that becomes embedded in the patient’s body and causes harmony in the energy balance and the mind.’ (From: Gebhard-Sayer/Illius, 1991).

A young shaman describes the way he works with the help of spontaneous sketches:

**TABLE 1.**

**FIGURE 12. Impaired body surrounded by harmful *nihue mis***



**FIGURE 13. A body after ritual cleansing, clearly visible, which is then covered with healing energy patterns produced in song**



‘Throughout the treatment, the spirits responsible for the illness try to disturb and confuse the emerging healing pattern and surround it with their *nihue* (harmful mist or bad and circling pneuma). The *muráya* faces these attacks with his healing patterns in singing but also with other means and therapeutic measures. If a patient is fated to die then the pattern does not penetrate the body and the *muráya* recognizes failed healing efforts at an early point in his treatment. If the spirits cause illness they do so by the ‘writing of harmful patterns on a person’s body’. In this case the *muráya* diagnoses the illness from this pattern.’ (Gebhard-Sayer, 1983, in Baer, 1987, p.75-76)

The shaman sees the otherwise invisible body patterns of the patient sitting or recumbent in front of him. The state of these patterns tells him something about the patient's condition: body patterns of individuals who are ill are 'twisted' or 'destroyed'. The shaman orders this pattern, he 'repairs' it with his singing. The song texts say that the patterns are 'ordered', 'made straight' or 'redirected'. Body patterns represent a Shipibo's psychic and physical integrity. Shamans call this restoration of the body pattern which is a metaphor for healing, 'calling back the soul' (Illius, 2005, p.A35). The evil spirits put their *nihue*, their (dark, misty, evil-smelling) individual essence on individuals and thus weaken his life energy (*shinan*). This weakening may lead to a dissociation of his two identity aspects of body (*yora*) and 'dream ego' (small soul, *caya*). In the worst case, if the shaman does not succeed in removing the *nihue*, death may occur (compare Illius, 1987, p.91).

There are at least 15 different kinds of *nihue*, all caused by different spirits, with different colours and qualities, which a shaman must be able to identify and distinguish exactly in order to remove them. In this process the *nihue* is 'detached, loosened, rubbed off, separated, spread, thrown away, washed off, crushed, etc., (but) the *nihue* is never finished off completely. It is indestructible, and the *yonshinbo* (spirits) can only be driven away but not killed. This is why humans fall ill again and again.' (Illius, 1987, p.185).

The shaman sings:

'The powerful humming-bird,  
the powerful metal humming-bird  
with patterns on the tip of its beak,  
I want it to replace the *nihue*.  
Humming-birds have patterns,

golden humming-birds have patterns  
on the tip of their beaks they have patterns.  
With these patterns I make them clean the body.  
A powerful flower!  
A powerful ayahuasca flower!  
(...) Gleaming all over  
they dance in a row.’  
(Neten Vitá in: Illius, 1987, p.61)

A young shaman expresses the idea as follows: ‚Healing energy is going to enter your body with the help of the songs.’ (D.V.S./S.C.). And a European woman who attended a nocturnal ritual told me: ‘It feels as if the icaros touch my cells from within.’

In this context permit me a short excursion to the other end of the world, to Tuva in Mongolia, for an intercultural comparison. Many years ago I talked to Nikolay Oorzak, a Tuvinian shaman, about the healing powers of the human voice, and he told me:

‘There are healing songs with established texts. These shaman healing songs are called ‘algysch’ in the Tuva language. But I improvise most parts in the moment of healing. You have to feel the words a patient needs, which words are healing for him. Then I sing these words into his body.’

My very personal way of processing my experience among the Shipibo which was challenging in every respect was to write and to paint in aquarell colours. From my notes:

‘Finally in the evening the second ritual: the old master shaman, that is, grandfather, grandmother, son and grandson all work together with us. The *ceremonia* involves a spectacular treatment of a seriously ill woman. In one song at the height of the ritual I have the impression of witnessing a terrible fight, a martial battle. The next day Juan confirms exactly this moment in the serious

struggle. Supported by the icaro, he entered the woman's body, her stomach, in order to 'see' the illness and to fight its causes. - Finally, very late at night and deadly tired, it is my turn to be treated. Juan has taken a second big gulp from the ayahuasca bottle in order to go on singing. While he sings for me, I perceive once again (as so often during the previous nights) visions of soft and brightly coloured hovering patterns before my wide-open eyes in the deep-black jungle night. They seem to be everywhere, no matter whether I close my eyes or leave them open. Meanwhile my upper body extends along the upper arms, to left and right simultaneously, in a permanent expanding movement, which I watch with fascination. I wonder what is happening to me that night, even without the intake of ayahuasca. I see a little girl standing alone in a drab and wet harbour area, and I feel terribly sad for a short time. The lateral enormous expansion goes on and produces a big pleasant empty space in my chest, like a cave. A tremendous relief after so much pressure on my heart over the past days. This pressure now moves upward and settles under my chin like an unbearable lump. I am overcome with sudden nausea. In exactly that moment, Juan blows tobacco smoke over my head in the darkness, and thus sucks all tension out of my head. I feel relieved immediately and liberated. My dreams that night are 'sweet', erotic and blissful, and when I mention them next morning in Juan's presence we have a hearty laugh together.'

**FIGURE 14. Photo No. 16 Forest in flames – clearing land by fire near the village**

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**FIGURE 15.** *majakene* patterns – thunderstorm in the dry period

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### *Coda*

What could be the significance of the events I described here for our western kind of medicine, and also for music therapy in medicine? Let me try some reflecting transfer.

- A new and at the same time age-old culture of relational medicine would be beneficial to ‘health’ in our health care system. Shipibo sha-

mans are masters of indirect relation, always involving a patient's social background. All kinds of illness are seen as 'psychosomatic' since shamans do not distinguish between emotional, social, physical and mental-spiritual causes.

- The dimension of healing as an art should become an integral part of western medicine with its scientific orientation. Among the Shipibo (and also in other healing traditions, for example Sufi or Ayurveda) healing rituals have a highly aesthetic dimension of beauty and appropriateness (*kikín*) involving all sensory levels. They may be seen as comprehensive works of art.
- The role of the community has to be supported again in the context of health, illness and dying, and we must fight postmodern individualization that brings illness and isolation. There is much we can learn from the Shipibo.
- The Shipibo shaman assumes unconditional responsibility for the healing process and demands absolute submission from the patient; this is in contrast to our ethical concept of offering therapeutic support as 'help to help ourselves'. But absolute trust, safety, protection and submission are powerful agents to active self-healing powers and to stimulate positive changes in the temporarily regressive state of being at the mercy of the illness.
- Nonverbal communication as a factor in the process is very important for the success of any type of intervention. This is why medical staff has to be schooled in the communicative effects of the sound of the human voice. At the Heidelberg university hospital I work together with nursing staff, with medical students, physicians and therapists, and we explore ways to shape positive, healing therapeutic relationships in the way we express ourselves.
- Therapeutic work with sound and voice as well as energetic healing are possible in our culture, too, without having to use ayahuasca. Such adjuvant interventions should be given more room in the medical context, so that patients are not forced to be secretive about using such additional resources. The method of 'ritual body positions and ecstatic trance'® according to Felicitas Goodman (1992) for example offers a comparable and beneficial mode of experience for altered states of consciousness with easy dosage.
- The particular healing powers of the human voice reported from earliest times onwards that are still part of knowledge and practice in some traditional cultures are currently reaffirmed and validated in many scientific studies (using different modes and terminology). People learn again that it is healthy and even fun to sing. The Shipibo demonstrate that singing directed at persons – as it was practiced in Europe until late in the middle ages – is a highly effective 'relational drug' without

side effects. In music therapy, for example, we can use this knowledge to find modes of intervention that correspond to our times and culture.

### *What I learned*

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Everything I tried to present in this paper is the result of momentary impressions. Despite written versions of the Shipibo language, theirs is an oral culture living in the flow of ‘improvisation’, that is, being recreated all the time. There is the continuity of a common history, a tradition passed on in tales, myths, shapes, colours and music. But this is the art of creation that lives anew every day, every moment, with each listener. The stories told in ethnological books are, strictly speaking, only true in the moment of telling, not for the next day, not for the next ayahuasquero, not for the next village. It was a lesson and a challenge for me to discuss with the Shipibo this kind of ‘permanent impermanence’ that has more contradictions than consistencies.

My intention was not to idealize the Shipibo culture. Notwithstanding our postmodern longing for the ‘original’ and ‘authentic’, the life of the Shipibo is full of existential problems, with unbelievable material poverty and tremendous social wealth. I am deeply grateful to them for accepting me as a guest and permitting me insights into their everyday lives and spiritual healing traditions; I also wish to thank N.Nauwald, A. Gebhard-Sayer, V. Harms and others for their valuable advice.

**FIGURE 16. A farewell present of friendship: Protective energy patterns for the author that unfortunately faded away after two weeks.**

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All photos in this article: ©Sabine Rittner

The names of indigenous interview partners were coded.

Translation into German: the author

Translation of the German article into English: Christina Wagner

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*This article can be cited as:*

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Rittner, S. (2007) Sound – Trance – Healing - The sound and pattern medicine of the Shipibo in the Amazon lowlands of Peru. *Music Therapy Today* (Online 18th July) Vol.VIII (2) 196-235. available at <http://music-therapyworld.net>

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