The Healing Power of the Icaros: A Phenomenological Study

The focus of this study is to explore the phenomenon of the healing with an icaro during an ayahuasca ceremony in the tradition of Peruvian mestizo vegetalismo, as well as to identify key aspects of the musical perception to which healing meanings are attributed.

Participants in this study are five men and women with extensive experience with brew in this context, each of whom was able to identify the icaro in the recording of the ceremony where the phenomenon emerged. The data collection procedures include a written report of the experience, and two in-depth interviews. The analysis employs the method of Descriptive Phenomenology for Psychology, as developed by Giorgi (1985; 1987; 1997; 1998; 2000).

Ten months of fieldwork in the areas of Tarapoto and Pucallpa were required to collect the data. Thirty-seven ceremonies were sound-recorded, with a total of 239 attendees. The emergence of the phenomenon was charted within the demographic parameters of sex and age. A formal musical analysis of the icaros identified by participants is included in the study as complimentary data. Additional data collected during the fieldwork include 120 hours of recordings of icaros sung by different ayahuasqueros, and in-depth interviews of six of them on their perspectives of how the icaros heal.

The study is expected to be completed by December 2007. While I originally planned for six months of field work, it ended up being ten months of intensive research, personal challenge, and a first-hand understanding of this tradition—both its social context and cosmology. The financial support of the Kranzke grant was invaluable in allowing the completion of that stage, as well as opening compelling research possibilities beyond this study.

Susana Bustos is a clinical psychologist and music therapist from Chile. Her work on drug abuse and on the therapeutic aspects of expanded states of consciousness dovetailed with her passion for music and song during her first journey to the Peruvian Amazon in 1989, where she experienced an icaro sung by Rose Giove, one of the founders of Takiwasi.

The Ayahuasquero and Personality: A Study

The Kranzke scholarship was instrumental in helping complete my study of the personality traits and characteristics of frequent ayahuasca drinkers in North America. This research used the most accepted and validated of the personality assessments, the MMPI and MMPI-2. This research built on previous findings on personality done with smaller, less-known measures of personality conducted with frequent drinkers of ayahuasca done in South America within the Uni De Vegetal (UDV), the first and largest of the religions that have formed their own communities centered on the use of ayahuasca. By studying a North American population that was not living within or closely tied to participation in a religious community, it was hoped that a clearer view of the personalities of ayahuasca drinkers outside of these religious and cultural settings could be created.

Thirty-four frequent North American drinkers of ayahuasca were administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-2). The MMPI personality description for the group was within normal limits of personality. The responses of the ayahuasca drinkers were not found to have a high correlation with the scores of drug and alcohol abusers. All scores, with the exception of low aggression, were within normal ranges of personality. No overall difference between the high and low use groups was found. The study found personality traits of North American ayahuasca drinkers to be within normal limits of personality. The study strongly suggests that frequent drinking of ayahuasca in the North American population has produced no