

## ayahuasca and shamanism in addiction therapy: report from the peruvian amazon

Michel Mabit

**a**TTempting to cure drug addiction by the ritual use of ayahuasca, a plant beverage with psychotropic effects, might appear to be crazy or at least very daring. When Takiwasi (Center for the Rehabilitation of Drug Addicts and for Research of Traditional Medicines) was born in September 1992 in Tarapoto, Peru, the idea of the founders was to investigate and use in a systematic way the Amazonian healers' shamanistic knowledge to cure drug addicts. This applied research has now been underway for three and a half years seeking an efficient, low cost and culturally adapted alternative therapy. The initial results are encouraging.

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Drug addiction has become a serious and important public health problem here since Peru became one of the biggest world producers of coca basic paste. The traffickers are falling into their own trap, consuming the product destined for exportation. Also, in times of overproduction, they have begun to sell the drug inside Peru. This problem is not well-known in the rich countries... No solution has been available to the coca basic paste addicts, who are becoming more numerous day by day especially in the Alto-Huallaga, a region of high production.

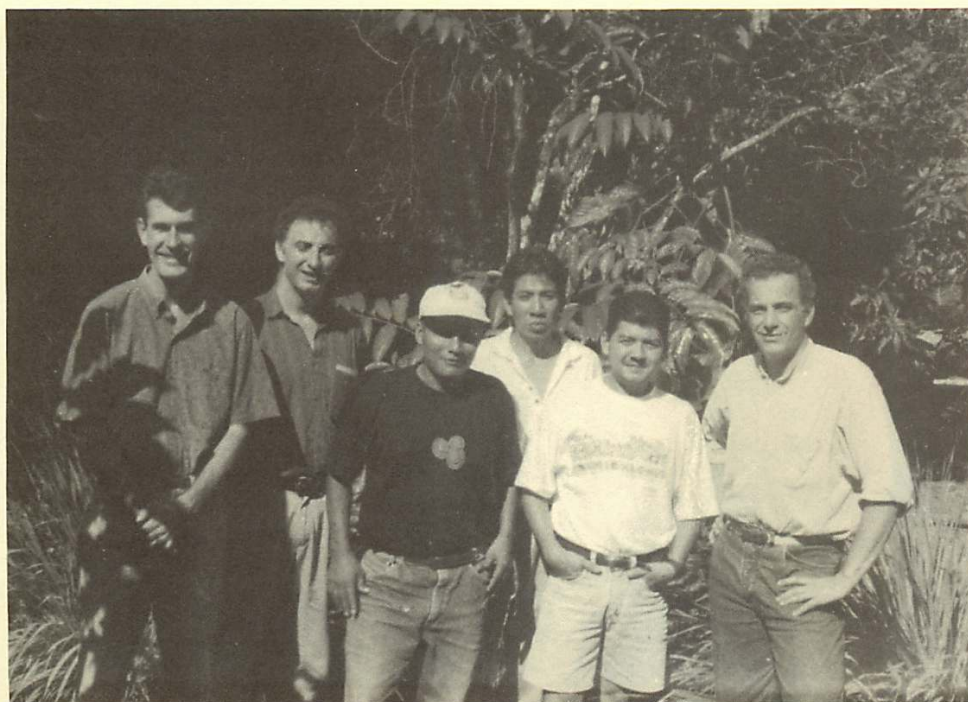
Fortunately, wherever there is a problem there exists a solution, at least in the experience of the two main people responsible for the creation of Takiwasi: Dr. Jacques Mabit, a French doctor in Peru conducting research into traditional "curanderos"<sup>1</sup> and José Campos, a young Peruvian descendent of an Andean family of curanderos. During six years travelling together through the Upper-Huallaga river valley they met more than 70 curanderos. These "maestros"<sup>2</sup> told them that the only way to understand their work was through ingesting the plants themselves. Thus the scientific work became a learning journey, bringing them into ever closer contact with traditional knowledge of medicinal plants and especially the greatly-respected ayahuasca, in continuous use for thousands of years throughout the Amazon basin. They observed its use by the "ayahuasqueros"<sup>3</sup> in the

treatment and cure of all kinds of physical and psychological illnesses and came to understand that seeking "altered states of consciousness" through the use of psychoactive substances is not synonymous with drug addiction. In spite of the powerful effects produced by ayahuasca, they never once met an "ayahuasca addict." On the contrary, as a curandero progresses in his practice, he needs to drink less and less of the brew. They were also surprised to find that these curanderos treat drug addicts with ayahuasca.

Takiwasi was created as an experimental center to treat drug addicts using traditional Amazonian medicines. Takiwasi means "the singing house" in the Quechua language, so-called because the therapeutic song or "ikaro" is the favorite healing weapon used by the Amazonian shamans and also in Takiwasi. The idea was to apply the healers' art in a more systematic way.

By modifying his state of consciousness with drugs, the drug addict looks for a meaning in his life and often for an unconscious access to "God." This method has always been used through the ages by every culture. The majority of today's drugs are made with plants (wine, alcohol, heroin, cocaine, marijuana) which are considered as "sacred" in many cultures and for that reason are taken ritually. All the Amazonian healers or shamans explain that psychoactive plants are not only a mixture of chemical substances but are living entities with a "spirit" which can help and





Therapy team of Takiwasi.  
from left to right:  
Dionisio Santos,  
Michel Mabit,  
José Campos,  
Javier Zavala,  
Jaime Torres,  
Jacques Mabit  
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cure if they are respected but kill if they are abused. Rediscovering the ritual is essential. The aim of Takiwasi is to help the patient to get over his addiction teaching him that he can modify his state of consciousness without damaging himself and gain a more spiritual outlook on his life, giving him strength and faith. He will experience and understand this vision of life himself from inside during the Ayahuasca sessions and the diet.

#### **The team**

Jacques Mabit and José Campos were joined by other adventurers all passionate about shamanism: Rosa Giove, Peruvian doctor; Dionisio Santos, administrator and Rony Rengifo, Peruvian therapist. Today, the team also includes two Peruvian psychologists Jaime Torres and Javier Zavala and Michel Mabit, French journalist in charge of communication. All participate in the therapy. They have followed exactly the same treatment as the patients in order to practice it. They undergo this "initiation" together with the patients. During the ayahuasca sessions, both therapists and patients consume the beverage. Thus the therapist forms a very close bond with his patients. In addition, there is a working network of healers who are native to the region with whom it is always possible to consult.

#### **Costs and funding**

The French government has supported the Takiwasi project since 1990, before its official creation and has so far provided US\$ 320,000 mainly through the General Delegation For the fight against Drugs and Drug Addiction, a subsidiary of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and also through the French Technical Cooperation. The European Community supported the project for two years

(1993-1995) with the sum of US\$ 340,000. From December 1995 to December 1997 the post of Director of Communications is being financed by the United Nations Volunteers program. We are also expecting a volunteer from the organization CUSO-Canada in July 1996. We have received private donations from various people, mainly through the Association of Support for Takiwasi created in France in 1993. Total from that fund up until now: US\$ 10,000.

The principal reason that the French government and the European community support Takiwasi is their support of the search for an alternative therapy in the treatment of drug addiction. The project was presented as a therapeutic alternative utilizing medicinal plants and local recourses in general without focusing solely on ayahuasca or other psychotropic plants. However, both financiers are informed of the use of these plants and the term psychotropic plants does figure in the contract with European Community.

Out of the above-mentioned donations, US\$ 200,000 were used to buy the land and install all the infrastructure of the center (buildings, materials, vehicles). The rest was used for the running costs of the center (salaries, food, maintenance). Takiwasi currently runs on US\$ 100,000 per year with salaries ranging from 250 to 1,000 dollars per month for the therapeutic team. Ideally, the sum required to cover the running costs would be US\$ 150,000 to provide treatment (with all the related costs), appropriate salaries and training for the team. In order to realize improved and effective investigation and information, a further US\$ 100,000 per year is required.



*Soplada*: the curandero José Campos blowing tobacco on a patient's head  
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Takiwasi is registered with the Ministry of the Presidency of Peru as a recipient of International Cooperation. It is a Peruvian NGO — Non Governmental Organization — and its legal title is “non profit organization.” Private donations may be received. Donations can be made by check in dollars or by giros to our dollars savings account at the Banco de Credito, Tarapoto, Peru account no. 550/9285296-20. An official receipt is sent to donors to enable them to offset their donation against tax. The estimated real cost of each patient's treatment is US\$ 800 per month. Being experimental, the center has a maximum capacity of 15 or 20 patients at one time. In reality, we have an average of 10 patients. The price is adapted to the economic means of the patients and their families. Patients without economic resources are also accepted.

#### **Activities carried out**

It should be noted that Takiwasi is not only a center for the treatment of drug addicts. Apart from therapy with drug addicts, Takiwasi also receives outpatients with psychological problems and outside researchers for short periods of study. The Center's work also involves training, education and investigation. The investigative work has not been properly developed so far. The studies we want to develop in the coming years are neurophysiology, psychoanthropology, botany and phytochemistry. This work could be carried out by external investigators or laboratories in collaboration with Takiwasi both in terms of cost (with Takiwasi providing the infrastructure and logistical base for data collection) and of the results and even possible benefits derived. A research program is underway into traditional medicine (medicinal plant resources, psychocultural and energetic aspects of

shamanism and traditional healing). An important part of the work is dedicated to diffusion of information through courses, conferences, TV and radio programs and organization of a Latin American network of Centers that fight drug addiction without coercion and using local resources. The Center publishes the biannual magazine *Takiwasi* in Spanish to reflect upon exchanges, views on the usage (therapy) and abuse (drug addiction) of psychotropic substances and upon modified states of consciousness in general. Four issues have been published to date. An English issue is being prepared.

Three times each year, the center also organizes three-week Seminars For Personal Evolution which are open to people who want to experience shamanistic techniques. Participants in the seminar do not have to speak Spanish although it does certainly help them to adapt and communicate with the other participants. We can accomodate seminar participants in English, French and Portuguese. So far we have received French, Brazilians and an Australian, none of whom spoke Spanish and all of whom enjoyed the experience. The next seminar will take place September 3-24, 1996. For further information, please contact:

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Telephone and fax: 00.51.94.52.54.79.

#### **Footnotes**

1. “curandero” is someone who cures using medicinal plants and many other healing techniques. In this context, it refers to a specialist in medicinal plants and especially ayahuasca.
2. “maestro” or Master is a title of respect usually used to address the older or wiser curanderos.
3. “ayahuasquero” is a curandero for whom ayahuasca constitutes the basis of his treatment.