

AN INTRODUCTION TO ASMEVEI, A RECENTLY FORMED GROUP OF VEGETALISTA HEALERS IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

Kevin Jernigan (baraka@arches.uga.edu)

In the Summer of 2001, while doing anthropological research on ayahuasca healing in Iquitos, Peru, I had the opportunity to attend some meetings of a newly formed healers' organization, ASMEVEI (Asociacion de Medicos Vegetalistas de Iquitos). I made the acquaintance of several of its members, who assisted me with my research and remain my friends to this day.

I brought the existence of the group to the attention of MAPS, which has generously offered them a donation of \$500 to help support traditional plant-based psychedelic healing.

The group, whose name means Association of Plant-based Healers of Iquitos, formed on June 17th, 2001, with several important goals in mind. These are:

- 1) To strengthen and reestablish the value of traditional cultural practices and the social values represented in the treatment of illness with medicinal plants of the Peruvian Amazon
- 2) To gain recognition and support from public and private institutions
- 3) To contribute to improving the state of public health, holistically, by using knowledge and practice of traditional treatments with medicinal plants from the region
- 4) To promote the training of new herbal doctors in order to disseminate and perpetuate medicinal uses of plants.
- 5) To contribute to the promotion and diffusion of traditional medicine
- 6) To promote, coordinate and support the development of projects for the benefit of members and the community
- 7) To promote the conservation, cultivation, management, and careful use of medicinal plant resources so as to avoid overexploitation of the forest
- 8) To formulate and carry out holistic development plans, through the activities of the association so that they may contribute to profitable use by their country.

This group of curanderos was formed with the assistance of Elsa Rengifo, a biologist working with the Peruvian governmental research institution IIAP (Institute for Research on the Peruvian Amazon). Currently there are 32 members of the association, 21 men and 10 women who practice the vegetalista tradition.

The vegetalista tradition often in-



Association member Odelia Chota and family selling medicinal plants

volves the use of ayahuasca, tobacco and other visionary plants as means of diagnosing those illnesses which are thought to have a spiritual cause. In a typical healing ceremony, both the patient, the healer, and in some cases, the patient's family or friends will take ayahuasca to understand the cause of the illness and as a means of purifying the body and spirit. These healers often treat other kinds of illnesses as well, and tend to be knowledgeable about a variety of medicinal herbs.



ASMEVEI members with medicinal plants and preparations

Ayahuasca and similar plants also play a vital role in training to become a curandero. The process of training involves learning the curing techniques directly from the spirits of teacher plants, in a process called dieting. During the diet, the apprentice abstains from sex and all but very bland foods (without sugar, salt or spices), and isolates himself in the forest to consume a particular healing plant, along with ayahuasca and tobacco, which also facilitate the learning process. To become a curandero, one must usually go through four or five such diets, although many healers continue to learn more by dieting throughout their career. The variety of plants considered capable of teaching medicine is large, and many of these plants have not been well studied scientifically. Much work remains to be done in understanding their chemical constituents and their potential

psychoactivity. For more information on the botanical identity of some of these plants, and their cultural uses, see McKenna et al., 1995, and Luna, 1984.

Since its formation, ASMEVEI has held meetings weekly. It has ratified its bylaws in order to obtain official recognition as an organization by the Peruvian government. It has also held workshops as a format for exchange of knowledge about healing practices among its members. As one of their first projects, the association conducted surveys of its membership, in order to collect and archive information about their personal history, training as healers and their current healing practices. A couple selections from these archives will serve to give the reader a better understanding of this healing tradition.

Norma Panduro Navarro, the vice president of the association, for example, became acquainted with the healing path when she was seventeen years old. She was living in Iquitos, the city of her birth, when she became ill with tuberculosis. Her mother took her to visit a curandero living on the Ucayali river, who cured her illness with plant-based medicine. She writes "from that moment on, I firmly embraced natural medicine." Since then, she has learned much about medicinal plants, their healing barks and resins, about ayahuasca and the magical songs called icaros that healers use in their curing. Norma recounts that during her first experience taking ayahuasca, she saw the pot that was used to boil the brew shine a brilliant gold, and she could smell the fragrance of flowers in its smoke. Then the spirit of ayahuasca approached her whistling its magical song. It sat before her with its eyes closed. When its eyes opened they were shining with the brilliance of the moon. It asked her if she wanted to learn good or bad magic, and she accepted the former. Currently, Norma is working on building a healing center outside of Iquitos to treat addiction and other kinds of illness.

Another healer, Humberto Chota Cenepo also began his career by recovering from an illness. He journeyed to the Pastaza river to cure a seemingly incurable hernia.

He dieted for nine months abstaining from sex as well as sugar and salt, consuming five medicinal plants, *sacha ajos*, *sanago*, *sananguillo*, *copaiba* and *sangre de grado*. One night, the spirits of these plants appeared to him, first taking the form of skulls, then disappearing, only to reappear later in person. They told him "From this moment on, you are a *curandero*, and will cure all kinds of illnesses with our help." Later, one day, he met a sick man and decided to see whether the spirits' had told him the truth. He called upon them in the manner that they taught him, and, sure enough, they appeared and helped him with his curing.

I believe that organizations such as ASMEVEI could have a key role to play in the struggle to gain international recognition and legal acceptance of plant-based psychedelic healing, since these healers are the heirs of traditions that first discovered these plants. In order for this to happen, however, there must be a mechanism for their voices to be heard on an international level. One of the goals of ASMEVEI, to create a web site for communicating their ideas, will help toward this end. I also hope that researchers who are studying or planning a study with ayahuasca or other traditional plant medicines would consider the benefits of exchanging ideas with these or other traditional healers. ■



Healer Antonio Barrera Banda performs a ceremony for parents who want their child to grow up to be a healer.

Works Cited

McKenna, D. J., Luna L. E., and Towers, G. N. 1995. Biodynamic constituents in ayahuasca admixture plants: An uninvestigated folk pharmacopoeia. In *Ethnobotany: Evolution of a discipline*, eds. R.E. Schultes

and S. von Reis. Portland: Dioscorides.

Luna, L. E. 1984. The concept of plants as teachers among four mestizo shamans of Iquitos, Northeastern Peru. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 11:135–156.

Contact person for ASMEVEI:

Elsa Rengifo
 Instituto de Investigaciones de La
 Amazonia Peruana (IIAP)
 Av. Abelardo Quiñones Km. 2.5 -
 Iquitos, Perú
 Email: erengifo@iiap.org.pe



Yana Yakumama
 Detail
 Pablo Amaringo