

**Knowledge of the Jaguar Shamans of *Yuruparí* Intangible Heritage
of Humanity
Knowledge for Sustainable Development?**

For indigenous peoples in the Amazon western notion of “Nature” does not exist. “Nature” is an alien category to refer to no human peoples who inhabits the forest along with human communities. Descola has denominated “animism” the specific way those peoples hold a relation with nature, where humans and no-humans are alike in terms of subjectivity, although their external physical differences (2005, p. 183). The same author calls western ontology “naturalism”, where human and non-humans beings have different internal lives but are physically linked (p. 203). Virtanen and Saarinen have summarized the same reality in the following words: “the Amazonian logic of interaction between beings is based on the idea that behind the different bodies is a shared humanity” (2002, p. 299). In their work, they address the problem of how to integrate this cultural particularity into sustainable development. The respectful and sometime ambiguous relations with “Nature” beings are built on a morality which would be “the basis of the sustainability of the Amazonian communities”.¹

In 2011, UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage listed the whole cultures of seven Amazon indigenous peoples as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Those peoples inhabit the Pirá-Paraná river (one of the tributaries of Apaporis river, in Colombian east

¹Nevertheless, the authors remind us that “this is not to say that the native and mestizo people would be sustainable *a priori*, because when lacking alternatives, information or resources, they may not be able to look after their environment. In other words, they are not conservers as such, but have a personal relation with their environment”(p. 231).

Amazon). Their cultures were declared intangible heritage of humanity, during the sixth session of the Intergovernmental Committee (November 2011). The heritage initiative was endorsed by the Colombian Ministry of Culture, the indigenous organization “Asociación de Capitanes Indígenas de Pirá-Paraná” (ACAIFI)² and the Gaia Amazon Foundation.³ As described by UNESCO, these indigenous cultures are “an organic system of traditional knowledge aimed at maintaining the delicate balance of relations between humans and Nature, and contains millennial wisdom for managing territory, time and life”. The indigenous groups seek for international protection within “a respectful connection with Western processes for environmental conservation”.⁴

In this text, we underline an element of the seven cultures listed in 2011, that we argue is the utmost importance in the special relationship with “Nature” within Amazon peoples in general: the use of sacred plants as tobacco, coca and ayahuasca.⁵In particular, we claim that cultural recognition of the sacred uses of those vegetal items would be a way to protect cultural practices linked with sustainable development thinking. Alongside with Descola (2005), Virtanen and Saarinen (2002), we follow the ecologist approach of American-Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar in our analysis. This author warrants against an interpretation of sustainable development, which actually misunderstand the ways nature is symbolized in traditional cultures. In this misunderstanding, nature is just a resource that is necessary to preserve; knowledge about nature would be a

²Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia Asociación de Capitanes Y Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas Del Rio Pira Parana – Acaipi. Nomination Form Ich 2 For Inscription on The Representative List of The Intangible Heritage World 2010 He Yaia Keti Oka Traditional Knowledge of the Jaguar Shamans of Yurupari. Pira Paraná, Gran Resguardo del Vaupés, Colombia. 2010 (included in UNESCO dossier).

³Personal communicatin with Martin von Hildebrand, head of Gaia Amazon Foundation, February 2013.

⁴ Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Sixth Session Bali, Indonesia, November 2011. Nomination File No. 00574 For Inscription On The Representative List Of The Intangible Cultural Heritage Of Humanity In 2011.

⁵Ayahuasca is actually a brew made from two main plants, the *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*.

particular set of techniques concerning some plants and animals possessed by specialized people (elders, shamans, healers). This view forgot the ontological perception of nature by indigenous cultures, and the deep historical relations between people and nature that has allowed developing such understanding of ecosystems (Escobar, 1999, p. 89).

Like other Amazonian cultures, within the seven cultures considered by UNESCO, nature is not just a resource, but an ensemble of beings that shamans must ask for permission before carry out any human activity. One way to communicate with the numerous beings in nature, are the sacred uses of plants as ayahuasca, coca and tobacco, which make part of *Piri-Parana* cultures and are explicitly considered in its declaration as intangible heritage:

“Although the ancestral knowledge for managing the territory - including the rituals, the Yuruparí sacred instruments, the sacred plants like the Yagé, Coca and Tobacco, and the wisdom that is concentrated in sacred sites - was handed to all ethnic groups living in the Yuruparí Territory, both in Colombia and in Brazil, it is only in the Pirá Paraná River basin that this knowledge has been preserved, is practised, and is transmitted from one generation to the next(...)Inclusion of this element in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage for Humanity would contribute to generating more awareness among indigenous people of the region about the importance not only of maintaining the cultural and spiritual heritage that they still possess, but also to recover what has unfortunately disappeared. Similarly, governments and society in general will understand the importance of conserving these ancient knowledge systems that are based on respect for Nature, and the urgency for multiple and intercultural strategies for life to continue on this Earth”(UNESCO, 2011).⁶

As mentioned above, ayahuasca brew and other plants are used during the Yurupari, a ceremony of utmost importance among the various peoples belonging

⁶Underline is ours. “Yajé” is the local name of ayahuasca.

to the tukano oriental language family (i.e. Macuna, Barasano, Eduria, Tatuyo, Tuyuca, Itana and Carapana) inhabiting the Vaupés department in Colombia. Yurupari is a ritual of passage, a celebration of the creation of the universe, a healing ceremony of the world, which implies the use of sacred “trumpets” also called “Yurupari”. The anthropologist Reichel-Dolmatoff devoted an entire book to the subject (1996), as well as analyses elsewhere in his work.

There are many concepts that are used by academics, researchers and practitioners to refer vegetal based substances as *ayahuasca*, or vegetal species as coca or peyote. We have for example the concept of “psychoactive”, that could be accurate for describe the neuro-physiology effects registered after the ingestion of substances or plants (Bouso and Farré, 2013). A concept more directly related with indigenous peoples practices is “medicine”. In Colombia, *ayahuasca* is also known as “the medicine” or “*el remedio*” (Taussig, 2002). To consider *ayahuasca* as medicine presuppose a holistic understanding of healing and sickness. In such understanding, body, mind, community, nature and spiritual world are interlinked and could be harmonized with the help of the plants, the ritual songs and the shamans.

Colombian anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna has spread a conception of *ayahuasca*, where the brew is seen as the material body of a “teacher” or “spiritual master”. It would offer to *ayahuasca* drinkers lessons about life, universe and themselves, related with personal healing processes (Luna, 1984). The understanding of *ayahuasca* as medicine, or master – teaching spirit embedded in the brew, is part of the knowledge of indigenous communities and other local actors working with these substances. It is why, from an anthropological point of view, we retain the concepts of “medicine”, “master spirit” or “teaching plant”, to refer to *ayahuasca*. As a master spirit, *ayahuasca* guides indigenous peoples in the realms of “nature” and allow them to speak with spirits from the forest, where all beings, human or non-humans, are connected and could achieve agreements to fulfill the needs of everybody.

In indigenous cultures, ayahuasca, along with other plants as coca and tobacco, allow humans to connect with “Nature”. They can foster the recognition of the ontological dimension by western culture of the so called “natural resources”. The declaration of shamanic uses of these plants as intangible heritage could be a way to recognize and preserve the function of these plants, in the production of the knowledge that allow indigenous peoples to have its sustainable lifestyle, recognized for example by article 8j in the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) and by UNESCO Medium Term Strategy 2008-2013 (UNESCO, 2008).

In the case of ayahuasca and coca, there is already a work done in order to achieve intangible heritage recognition. Concerning the coca leaf, Peru made of coca cultural heritage of Nation in 2005 (Labate, 2014, p. 37). In the ayahuasca case, Peruvian National Institute of Culture has designated the knowledge and traditional uses of *ayahuasca*, as practiced by native Amazon communities, intangible cultural heritage of the Nation in June 2008. One of the main objectives of this declaration was to preserve the brew from western commoditization. Peru has only recognized traditional uses of the brew as cultural patrimony, to explicitly exclude transnational shamanism tourism. It is important to note that differences between ritual uses of *ayahuasca*, in relation with commercial psychedelic substances, are underlined by the Peruvian declaration of *ayahuasca* as intangible heritage:

“The effects produced by Ayahuasca, extensively studied because of their complexity, are different from those produced by hallucinogens. A part of this difference consists in the ritual that accompanies its consumption, leading to diverse effects, but always within the confines of a culturally determined boundary, with religious, therapeutic and culturally affirmative purposes (...) what is sought is the protection of traditional use and sacred character of the Ayahuasca ritual,

differentiating it from Western uses out of context, consumerist, and with commercial objectives” (Fotiou, 2010: 339).

All the cultural and ethnobotanical richness sacred plants have for indigenous peoples and other communities, as well as the possibilities for medical and other kind of research about these plants that could beneficiate humanity, are dismissed by several international norms. One major challenge regarding sacred plants is the tendency by international law to classify them as “drugs”. The International Narcotic Control Board (INCB) reports of 2010 and 2012 state that plants used by indigenous people could be used for “recreational purposes”, outside its original ceremonial contexts: “The utilization of plant-based preparations that are not under international control and which contain natural psychoactive ingredients is often part of traditional indigenous rituals, traditional medicine and religious ceremonies(...)The Board pointed out some of the problems related to the use of those plant materials outside their original socioeconomic context in its annual report for 2010 (paras. 284-287). Since then, increasing interest in the use of such plant materials for recreational purposes has been noted”.⁷ Concerning coca issues, although Bolivian efforts to change the situation, the more than fifty years UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961) still condemns the use of coca leaf by Andean and Amazon peoples (Labate, 2014 pp. 25-35).

A very important international norm, which just focuses on the negative uses of tobacco, is the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) from 2003.⁸ Nevertheless, tobacco is a very complex plant and deserves more research to asset its various properties, history and ethnobotanic. We do not have space here to develop these matters. But we can

⁷The Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2012 E/INCB/2012/1, Paragraph 328 and 329.

⁸ World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) PART II: OBJECTIVE, GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND GENERAL OBLIGATIONS. Geneva, 2003. *Article 3*.

mention for example its onirogenic properties (i.t. it enables to have vivid dreams and remember them) when ingested as a brew prepared by Peruvian shamans.⁹

In the UN Declaration of Indigenous Peoples Rights (2007), articles 12, 24 and 31 recognize the right of indigenous peoples to use their plants and practice their spiritualities, as well as articles 5, 7 and 13 of ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989). 2003 UNESCO Convention could contribute to the recognition of the value of knowledge about these plants, foster ethnobotanical, cultural and clinical research and enhance cultural and ethnical diversity of nations where these plants are used so far. Concerning sustainable development, knowledge related with ritual uses of sacred plants are one of the core elements of sustainable life style of indigenous communities. The protection of ritual used of sacred plant resulting from its recognition as intangible heritage of humanity will be a legal, moral and scientist tool to arise awareness and measures on lore and practices conducting to a sustainable development life style. It would be the work of Amazon countries in the Intergovernmental committee for the safeguarding of Intangible cultural heritage, in consultation with indigenous peoples, to foster the recognition to those plants as intangible heritage of humanity. The listing of Knowledge of the Jaguar Shamans of *Yuruparí* as Intangible Heritage of Humanity would be a first step in that direction.

⁹For further information on tobacco ritual uses, see Matteson and Baer 1992.

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