

## 10 “La Dieta”

### Ayahwasca and the Western reinvention of indigenous Amazonian food shamanism

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Dietary taboos exist across virtually all human societies and they play important roles in religious and spiritual practices worldwide. Whether Hindu restrictions on meat for Brahmin religious leaders (Dumont, 1966), or Jewish restrictions on consuming milk products with meat (Freidenreich, 2011) or the Orang Asli of Malaysia selectively restricting meat consumption of animals with “weak” spirits (Bolton, 1972), dietary regimes often have associated logics of spiritual reasoning and practice.

Some researchers have argued that purely functionalist explanations can account for the significance of food restrictions in religious traditions. Undertaking a global analysis, Meyer-Rochow (2009) argued that religious food taboos function to either protect human health, sustain ecological systems, enforce inequalities among different populations, or strengthen identity or group-cohesion. In contrast to these type of explanations, Simoons (1994) argued that complex magico-religious beliefs and symbols are fundamental in trying to explain the significance of religious dietary restrictions around the world. The theoretical positions of both the functionalists and symbolists agree that understandings of the diversity of spiritual food taboos need to include consideration of the culturally or environmentally specific contexts of the restrictions.

Restrictions on dietary and behavioral regimes in spiritual practices across different cultures can be so radically different from each other that comparative approaches may strike readers as more than odd. Yet, this diversity also indicates how remarkable it is when a cultural group adopts the spiritual dietary restrictions of a different culture. The recent emergence and popularity of the indigenous Amazonian psychoactive drink ayahuasca among members of Western societies provides an example of how spiritual dietary practices may become reimagined and adapted within just a few decades. Ayahuasca is a shamanic medicine and religious sacrament that typically induces vomiting and visions or other non-ordinary sensory experiences. The practice of drinking ayahuasca is accompanied by a diversity of dietary regimes and related behavioral taboos in its different contexts of use across indigenous Amazonia.

In this chapter, we undertake a preliminary sketch of the comparative diversity of dietary taboos and behavioral prescriptions for drinking ayahuasca among indigenous, *vegetalismo* (pan-indigenous or “mestizo”), and Western neoshamanic therapeutic contexts. The ritual dietary regimes practiced by Western ayahuasca drinkers represent a significant departure from indigenous ontologies of “traditional” ayahuasca drinking. By analyzing this departure or reinvention, we illustrate how conceptions of personhood and sociality are mediated through natural and cosmological environments that inform particular kinds of ayahuasca dieting. We begin our investigation by considering how practices of shamanic food taboos among indigenous Amazonians are intimately linked to the human-environment nexus and corresponding ontological configurations of personhood.

The rainforest environments of indigenous Amazonian settlements embody significant factors or agents of the economic and social order of native life. Along one line of reasoning, anthropologists have worked to illustrate how material, ecological realities of indigenous Amazonian environments determine social life and social organization (Chagnon & Hames, 1979). This research tends to imply, and sometimes argue, that invisible, intangible, and metaphysical aspects of the cosmos are simply epiphenomena of “real” material determining factors, such as how different foods are procured, managed, and consumed. In contrast, more nuanced anthropology appreciates, and tries to also account for, how Amazonian cosmologies are influential to the constitution of human behavior, social organization, and personhood; which, as outlined below, is an influence that extends to dietary regimes and shamanic beliefs about foods. With a nod to Peter Rivière, this anthropology acknowledges the dialectic relationship between nature and culture, the technical and the ritual, and the visible and the invisible. It builds upon the premise that in native Amazonian contexts, the “invisible aspects of the world are as much part of the phenomenal world as the visible parts” (Rivière, 2010, p. 4); a reality that destabilizes Western categories of mind and body, ideal and real, and sacred and profane. In this chapter, our approach aligns with, and contributes to, this latter, symbolic anthropological approach by focusing on shamanic dieting related to ayahuasca consumption.

The entwined reality of the physical and the metaphysical is important to the institution of Amazonian shamanism, which has tended to concern itself primarily with issues related to hunting and the human-environment nexus (Viveiros de Castro, 1996). Among Amazonian cultural groups, the metaphysical permeability of the physical is also fundamental to how each individual undertakes the everyday achievement of being a human person (and not an animal or other nonhuman person). As described in the anthropological literature, “the person” in Amazonia is typically not a given entity, but something that is continuously achieved (or not achieved) through developing a proper body via proper ritual and behavioral acts. The tasks of hunting, gathering foods, practicing horticulture, and eating

foods accommodate this fundamental act of the cultural reproduction of the human person.

Common jobs of procuring foods may be tied not only to the cultural reproduction of the human person, but also to the cultural reproduction of the environment. Griffiths explain how “in many indigenous Amazonian societies human work is not only about the production of people, but also the reproduction of the world and the cosmos . . . Uitoto regard perpetual work as a way to maintain good relations with both people and spirit-beings in daily life” (Griffiths, 2001, p. 249). In this type of cosmological economy of souls (Viveiros de Castro, 1998), humans may be at risk of unachieving their human personhood – and becoming nonhumans – through the violation of food taboos. As mediators between human and nonhuman worlds, shamans have held significant responsibilities of enforcing food taboos, thus helping to maintain the achievement of human personhood among their respective settlements (Langdon, 1975; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1997b; Århem, 1996).

The use of ayahuasca by native Amazonians can be productively elucidated through considering in detail cultural logics of “food shamanism” and the “cosmonomics of food”<sup>3</sup> (Århem, 1996). While the practices of Amazonian shamans are obviously not confined to issues of the cosmological politics of foods – including food development, management, and consumption – the shaman’s role as mediator between the human and the nonhuman world places food shamanism as a significant point of entry for considering the universe of Amazonian shamanism.

As we demonstrate, an examination of Amazonian food shamanism provides a range of theoretical opportunities when considering the reimagining of shamanic dieting by Western ayahuasca drinkers in cosmopolitan contexts of Australia, the United States, and Peru. In what follows, we outline key research conducted on dietary and behavioral regimes within types of Amazonian shamanism that include ayahuasca drinking; then, we analyze reasoning and explanatory models of ayahuasca dieting among Westerners and consider how social and environmental realities appear to inform the practices.

Our methodology consists of textual readings of ethnographies of Amazonian shamanism in dialogue with our respective ethnographic research among ayahuasca-drinking circles in Australia, the United States, Europe, and Peru. Gearin conducted ethnographic research among ayahuasca neoshamanic circles in Australia during 2011–2014, and Labate has conducted fieldwork in Peru, Europe, and United States from 1996–2017 (see Gearin, 2015 and Labate, 2014).

Our approach focuses on the discontinuities – while including salient continuities – in the adaptation of ayahuasca dieting among Western ayahuasca drinkers. We consider how environmental and social realities of Western societies have set in motion limitations and contradictions within the adoption of ayahuasca dieting by Western ayahuasca drinkers.

### **Ayahuasca and Amazonian shamanism**

One of the first Westerners to ever drink ayahuasca and write about his experience was the English botanist Richard Spruce (1817–1893). In 1852, he was invited to a social event in the village of Panure on the Vaupés river, in what today is the southern Colombian Amazon rainforest. The event was entitled a “feast of gifts” and included song and dance and, among other psychoactive substances, five servings of ayahuasca. Moments after drinking his first ever cup of ayahuasca, Spruce was given, by the indigenous “ruler of the feast,” a large drink of beer and also a large cup of palm wine to consume (Spruce, 1908). This range of beverages at the historic event of Spruce’s first ayahuasca “feast” undoubtedly would not agree with most proponents of ayahuasca drinking in Western societies today. In the latter contexts, alcohol tends to be perceived as a profane substance that should be avoided for at least three days prior to drinking ayahuasca. Similarly, among native settlements of the Bajo Urubamba area, people today avoid alcohol before drinking ayahuasca; yet, concomitantly, they use the same term to describe the effects of ayahuasca and the effects of alcohol, *mar-eación*, while acknowledging that alcohol results in a “hangover” during the day after drinking, whereas ayahuasca results in feelings of elation, a desire to work, and good fortune (Gow, 2012). The wide use of tobacco in South American shamanism (Wilbert, 1993) represents a similar example of an inebriate that is sacred among cultures of the Amazon rainforest, yet sometimes perceived as profane and toxic by Western ayahuasca drinkers, who have occasionally criticized the presence of tobacco or tobacco smell or smoke in ayahuasca ceremonies, or created “tobacco-free” workshops. These examples serve as an introduction to the complexities of substances and meanings in the often-contradictory nexus of indigenous ayahuasca drinking and Western ayahuasca neoshamanism.

The idea of a generic pan-Amazonian system of shamanic thought and practice is problematized by the last 500 years of colonial and missionary interventions in the region. The influence of Catholicism, Protestant sects, European Spirits, and African religions on indigenous Amazonian shamanism has created the “colossal mixing” zone from which today’s ayahuasca practices have emerged (Chaumeil, 1992. p. 101). To add further complexity to this definition, the use of ayahuasca among remote indigenous peoples has not been characterized as homogeneous with regard to cosmological and practical schemas of use. Variations include ayahuasca being employed in some context for purifying the bodies of hunters, community initiation and strengthening group identity, conviviality, or healing and sorcery (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1997a; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997b; Harner, 1973; Brown, 1986; Luna, 1986; Brabec de Mori, 2011; Wright, 2013).

Amazonian shamans are often described as masters of the art of taking psychoactive preparations, and they may undergo long periods of training to achieve this mastery. The training often involves the neophyte undertaking

degrees of social isolation in combination with special diets (Harner, 1968; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1997a; Dobkin de Rios, 1972; Luna, 1986; Wright, 2013). Dietary restrictions and social isolation prepare the neophyte for the correct entry into the typically invisible dimensions of the cosmic environment. Armed with flutes, rattles or voices, psychoactive substances, and mythic and ritual formulations, the neophyte encounters the creative agents of the cosmos. These agents are significant to acts of cosmic reciprocity and predation that regenerate entities of the natural and cultural environment within cycles of death and birth. Shamanic practitioners continue different dieting practices beyond their initial training or initiation, in different ways, throughout their lives.

In what follows, we examine ethnographic research into dietary restrictions connected to ayahuasca consumption in forms of Amazonian shamanism. We have chosen to undertake a close examination of ethnographies of primarily Tukanoan-speaking settlements and *vegetalismo* shamanism. There are several reasons we focus on Tukanoan settlements: (a). there has been in-depth ethnographic research done on dieting and shamanism among Tukanoan settlements, (b). various anthropologists have hypothesized that ayahuasca use originated among Tukanoan peoples (see Brabec de Mori, 2011), and (c).Tukano-speaking peoples are recognized as the masters of ayahuasca par excellence by many indigenous groups (Chaumeil, 1992). The context of *vegetalismo* shamanism, as outlined below, represents an urbanized form of Amazonian shamanic practice characterized by ruptures and revivals of indigenous shamanism that have become very influential on the global expansion of ayahuasca use (see Labate & Cavnar, 2014).

### **Tukano food shamanism**

Beliefs and practices related to foods are significant, or even central, to indigenous Amazonian shamanism and ethnomedical systems (Langdon, 1975; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1997b; Århem, 1996; Shepard, Levi, Neves, Peres, & Douglas., 2012; Wright, 2013). In an influential paper on food shamanism, Århem (1996) illustrates the central importance of food for Makuna etiological understandings of illness and disease. Among the Makuna, pathologies are understood as resulting from a temporary dissociation of the soul from the body, caused primarily by the violation of food taboos. All foods should be properly handled and blessed by shamans before consumption in order to avoid sickness in the consumer.

Århem explains how knowledge about food restrictions and food blessings are embodied in many aspects of Makuna culture, including in myth. In Makuna myths, food is described as radically ambivalent and powerful, containing regenerative forces of the cosmos, described as “weapons.” The shaman’s role is to assure that the primordial powers of the spirit “weapons” in foods are converted to life-giving powers. They do this by chanting origin myths relative to each food over the particular foods before they are

eaten. The shaman sucks the “weapons” out of the foods and magically sends them back to their place of cosmic origin to be reborn. This act contributes to the cosmological regeneration of the environment (1996).

Århem explain how illness and disease are understood as “punishment for failed reciprocity” within the cosmo-ecological environment. He argues that this ethnomedical system is a “notoriously powerful sanction against environmental abuse” (1996, p. 201). The catching of fish and game animals in amounts beyond the needs of the family unit is only sanctioned for rare ritual feasts, and must be sanctioned by explicit approval from the shaman (1996). These spiritual logics of nature spirits and their associated acts of predation, exchange, and cosmological renewal permeate the ethnographic literature on Amazonian shamanism (Viveiros de Castro, 1996; Wright, 2013; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1997b).

Århem argues that this type of eco-cosmology appears to be constituted by deep environmental knowledge inherited in the form of myth and ritual. He states that human-environment negotiations in the complex order that exist at ecological levels may be imperfectly perceived in everyday life, yet abstracted in Makuna ritual and myth and embodied in sickness and healing.

Disease is viewed as cosmonomic mismanagement. The notions of health and curing are focused, not narrowly on the individual person, but on the natural and social whole of which the human patient is part . . . I think it is possible to see such representations and their integration into totemic, animic, and more complex eco-cosmological models as cultural codifications of deep ecological insights, developed during millennia of intimate practical interaction with the environment.  
(1996, pp. 201–202)

For the Makuna and other indigenous Amazonian cultures, food shamanism and dietary restrictions are intimately embedded in the everyday cosmological and political realities of human and nonhumans relations of an immediate environment or place of dwelling.

One of the pioneers of the anthropological study of indigenous ayahuasca use, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, published widely on Tukano shamanism in the 1960s and 70s. Similar to Århem’s work noted above, Reichel-Dolmatoff illustrated how, among the Tukano-speaking Desana, food restrictions mediated by shamanic knowledge constitute “an effective mechanism for realistic ecological adaptation” (1997b, p. 74). He explained that more serious or life-threatening diseases were conceived as being caused by human sorcery, while less serious illnesses, such as mental illness, are thought to be the result of revenge attacks committed by the spirits of game animals who are enforcing limits on food consumption (1997a).

Desana food restrictions are part of a larger cultural logic of spiritual color categories and schemas that permeate social, natural, and supernatural

environments. Desana science and religion are significantly held together by an epistemology of “chromatic color energy” knowledge. If food taboos are being violated and resources are being misused by an individual, the color balance of that person is said to change in ways that are harmful to health (1997b). Shamans diagnose patients by using ayahuasca and quartz crystals to perceive the color energies of people, and they attempt to rebalance the energies in the hope of restoring health. Reichel-Dolmatoff’s description is worth sharing in length to illustrate the culturally holistic and pervasive nature of the Desana spiritual color science and its relation to food restrictions and ayahuasca consumption:

The entire process of chromatic energy flow, as conceived by the Desana, is being closely watched by shamans who, through their crystals, hallucinatory trances, and, of course, sound empirical observation, observe the increase or depletion of animals, the growth of fruits, the distribution of feeding grounds, spawning beds, the oestrous comportment of the different species, and the change of seasons. The swirling colour patterns of narcotic trance are interpreted by them as manifestations of fertility, of uterine gestation, and of the processing of giving birth to edible foods and marriageable females. Since among the Desana all initiated males consume narcotic drugs, mainly *Banisteriopsis* potions, administered during collective rituals in which shamans are ready to “explain” a sequence of visions, a consensus is thus being established with reference to the chain of energies provided by the Master of Animals. An extraordinary complex body of spells and incantations is used by shamans to describe, orient, blend, and balance the different strands of energy and, at the same time, to extol the harmfulness of overhunting and overharvesting any given food resource.

(Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1997b, p. 57)

. . . the shaman transforms his patient. Once the nature of these chromatic changes has been established, the shaman’s task consists of applying the inexhaustible energies contained in his crystal to restore the lost balance. This entails a process of mixing, blending, diminishing, and strengthening of colours; of introducing certain hues; of dimming a brilliance here, or of brightening a dullness there; all this is done in lengthy spells and incantations, with both shamans and patient often being in a narcotic trance.

(Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1997b, p. 53)

The knowledge that justifies explanations of illness and disease and the ability to heal come from shamanic powers connected to ayahuasca rituals and associated food restriction ideologies.

Initiating to become a Desana shaman involves long periods of intense food restrictions and related behavioral regimes. Reichel-Dolmatoff recorded

a long and detailed description of shamanic initiation told by an elderly Desana shaman (1997a, p. 122–125). Over a period of several months, the initiate is removed from his community and spends time with several shamans in the remote forest. During the initiation, the neophyte consumes a very small amount of foods, mainly a simple broth and manioc starch. He becomes barely able to walk and spends most of the time in hammocks undergoing systematic training with different psychoactive plants, including ayahuasca. The neophytes are pushed to their physical and mental limits, “their prostrated emaciated bodies convulsed, their faces contorted, their hoarse voices chanting endlessly to the rhythm of their gourd rattles” (1997a, p. 123). The purpose of the intense food restrictions and deprivation is to make the body ready for shamanic work, to “dull” its existence to the point of psychic death and rebirth into shamanic realms of the ancestors and creator beings of the environment and world at large. The practice of intense food restrictions during initiations with ayahuasca and similar psychoactive substances is tied to the belief that ayahuasca may open the initiate to the realm of the ancestors and the different masters of animal and plant spirits.

Also examining shamanism among Tukano-speaking settlements, Langdon (1975) produced a whole thesis dedicated to food shamanism entitled, *Food restrictions in the medical system of the Barasana and Taiwano Indians of the Colombian Northwest Amazon*. Langdon explained how children are taught to fear foods from a very young age, and this emotional learning is integrated with food shamanism, ideas of illness and health, and the moral socialization of members of the settlement (1975, p. 290). According to Stephen Hugh-Jones (1979, p. 90), the Barasana conceived ayahuasca as a kind of “anti-food” that must not be consumed at the same time as foods. The adolescent rites of passage for boys includes a period of fasting, then strict food restrictions and ayahuasca consumption followed by the gradual reintroduction of a complex diet. Langdon explained that the food restrictions are centered upon a larger logic of complementary pairs in which fear and courage, self-deprivation and indulgence, and power and weakness, are important for the cultivation of proper adulthood and humanness (1975, p. 291). By learning to control their own appetites through deep fears of spiritual attack, the opportunity for cultivating courage and self-control is amplified. This courage finds its climax in the adolescent boys’ rites of passage in which, over a period of partial isolation and diverse food restrictions for 1.5 years, they drink ayahuasca to see the jaguar spirits of the blow pipe instruments, initiate, become men, and return to a full adult diet (1975, p. 292).

These case studies of food shamanism illustrate important examples of how ayahuasca-related food restrictions in classical literature on Amazonian shamanism are embedded in complex cosmovisions linked to the social and human-environment nexus. The complexity of shamanic food restrictions in Amazonian ayahuasca-drinking cultures, and how the restrictions correspond to realities of human and nonhuman relations in the immediate environment, sickness etiologies and remedies, and the emotional cultivation

of being an adult and human, indicates how dieting in these contexts is not simply a sacred practice, but deeply entwined in what Westerners tend to term “the everyday” or profane and ordinary, economic elements of living – including procuring, managing, and consuming foods.

### Peruvian vegetalismo

The expansion of ayahuasca use among indigenous populations connected to the Rubber Boom of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century involved the emergence in forest cities of what has been termed Peruvian ayahuasca *vegetalismo*. Tracking the diversity and transmission of ayahuasca knowledge and practice between indigenous settlements and vegetalismo urban contexts is a complicated and debated topic. On the one hand, anthropologists have suggested that vegetalismo is a “direct continuation” of indigenous forms of shamanism (Luna, 1986, p. 31); on the other hand, researchers have argued that vegetalismo has influenced indigenous ayahuasca use since the rubber tapping industries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gow, 1994). The debate about the origins of contemporary ayahuasca use is entangled in the intermingled historical space of rural and urban Amazonian shamanism (Chaumeil, 1992; Labate, 2014).

Dieting and social and sexual abstinence have been noted as central elements of ayahuasca use in the context of vegetalismo (Dobkin de Rios, 1972; Luna, 1986; Beyer, 2009). Luis Eduardo Luna highlights the centrality of dieting for *vegetalistas* (healers, doctors, *curanderos*) in their endeavors to acquire knowledge and health from ayahuasca and other “plant teachers.” The type of knowledge acquired by *vegetalistas* may include insight for diagnosing and curing illnesses, learning about distant places, finding lost objects, divining future activities, and communicating with the dead and with nature spirits (Luna, 1986, p. 16). He describes the significance of dieting in this context:

The idea of following a particular diet is seen as a *sine que non* both for becoming a *vegetalista* – i.e. for acquiring wisdom and strength – and for restoring one’s health. Only by purifying oneself by following the diet is one able to contact the spirit world, learn from the plants, and regain physical health. All *vegetalistas* insist that following the diet is the way of wisdom. They all say that while they follow their diets their minds work differently, they could observe and memorize more easily, even their bodies changed their smell, allowing them to study nature in a more direct way, and they had lucid dreams, in which the process of learning continued.

(Luna, 1986, p. 161)

Food and sexual prohibitions are assigned to acts of training or initiation whereby *vegetalistas* consume or diet with specific plants for extended

periods of time in order to build a clear and pure relationship with the spirit of the plant teacher, who in turn shares healing songs with the shaman (1986, p. 99). Vegetalista healers may diet not only with plant teachers, but potentially other types of “*doctores*”: including perfumes, metals, rocks, flint stones, and even modern medicines, such as aspirin (Luna, 1986, p. 103; Beyer, 2009, p. 61).

In the 1980s, Luna described a wide variety of food prohibitions that different vegetalistas of the Peruvian Amazon held necessary for drinking ayahuasca and for treating different sicknesses; the most common being a shamanic taboo on consuming pork (1986, p. 52). He noted that he could not find any clear reasons among vegetalistas for the different prohibitions of specific foods, asserting that the prohibitions must have their origins in native taboos “whose context has been forgotten” (Luna, 1986, p. 52). The separation of ayahuasca use from cosmogenic environments of hunting, gathering, and horticulture and into the vegetalismo, intercultural spaces of forest cities – with their capitalist modes of production and consumption – is arguably a key factor in processes of “forgetting” specific types of indigenous shamanic knowledge, including emic reasons for specific shamanic food taboos.

While various anthropologists have emphasized the cultural significance of the use of ayahuasca in vegetalista and indigenous contexts (Harner, 1973; Narby, 1998; Fotiou, 2010), Bernd Brabec de Mori argues that the cultural significance of ayahuasca has been somewhat exaggerated by anthropologists (Brabec, 2014). The indigenous ayahuasca practices noted above, that involve an inseparable dynamic of healing-sorcery or that support forms of hunting and group identity strengthening, were waning in parts of indigenous Amazonia during the mid-twentieth century (Dobkin de Rios, 1972; Luna, 1986). Now, with the emergence of international ayahuasca tourism, indigenous and vegetalista types of ayahuasca use are being transformed and accelerated by the tourist circuits of Western ayahuasca consumption.

### **Ayahuasca goes global**

During the previous three decades, the drinking of ayahuasca has expanded from being largely contained to regions of the Amazon rainforest and some parts of urban Brazil to being a transnational, cosmopolitan phenomena found across the globe. Global tourism markets, scientific investigations of ayahuasca’s health risks and benefits, and academics who have become proponents of the ayahuasca service economy, are all implicated in the cosmopolitization of ayahuasca in the global context (Caicedo, 2014; Peluso, 2017; Labate, Cavnar & Gearin, 2017). The intermixing of these different vectors of influence is making it increasingly difficult to draw neat boundaries between contemporary indigenous, vegetalismo, and Western types of ayahuasca use.

Spiritual exchanges and encounters between Amazonian societies and Western civilization are enduring cosmological contradictions in the complex

space of ayahuasca’s internationalization. Analyzing Euro-American ayahuasca rituals conducted by Amazonian shamans, Losonczy and Cappo (2014) illustrate how both parties communicate within effective models of misunderstanding. The performative space of collective rituals provides a series of registers from which both parties find “their own benefit in misunderstanding one another in order to agree with one another” (Losonczy and Cappo, 2014, p. 106).

In the reinvention of ayahuasca drinking in Western social milieus, psychological models of drinking ayahuasca have privileged and foregrounded the individual in self-diagnosing illness, disease, and spiritual affliction and self-prescribing the path out of suffering. Labate explains this trend towards psychologization, stating how

negative experiences and other problems that occur to participants during [ayahuasca] sessions are reinterpreted as symptoms of energetic blockages or psychological resistance, rather than, per typical native interpretations, as signs of attacks by rival shamans or sorcerers or on behalf of spirit agents.

(Labate, 2014, p. 186)

In Western contexts, the psychologization of ayahuasca and the privileging of the individual in conceiving his or her own illness, disease, suffering, well-being, and personal development is mediated through the body and conceptions of food and behavioral restrictions commonly known under the rubric of the “ayahuasca dieta” – a topic that has not received much attention in the literature so far.

### **Western ayahuasca “dieta” practices**

Westerners who train in the art of providing ayahuasca services of spiritual healing retreats and ceremonies may be found across South America, North America, Europe, Australia, and, more recently, parts of Asia, including India, Indonesia, and Thailand (Labate Cavnar & Gearin, 2017b). The people conducting these ayahuasca services often have undergone types of apprenticeship in the Amazon Rainforest with native or mestizo healers. Indigenous knowledge, or interpretations of indigenous knowledge, has become important resources of therapeutic and spiritual reasoning for proponents of Western ayahuasca neoshamanism. The term “interpretation” here should be emphasized to highlight the polysemic use of indigenous knowledge within the Western reimagining of indigenous ayahuasca use. The emergence of ayahuasca knowledge on a global scale is couched in a complicated intercultural space. As Daniela Peluso explains:

The inventive global expansion of ayahuasca rituals creates a set of encounters that bring together individuals with highly convergent

epistemologies and experiences, creating a sundry montage of cognitive, emotional, and practical cultural systems rife with contradictions and potential misunderstandings.

(Peluso, 2014, p. 231)

The ayahuasca dieta may be understood as one of the most robust attempts of introducing concepts and practices from indigenous Amazonian shamanism to the Western world. Ayahuasca retreat centers and circles around the world, almost without fail, prescribe pre- and post- ceremony dietary and behavioral requirements for drinking ayahuasca. These requirements may be found on ayahuasca center websites, and they are also emailed to ayahuasca drinkers as part of essential information packs that outline ceremony preparation rules and frequently animate endless discussions and conversations both online and in-person. Western-run ayahuasca centers and circles often codify the need for participants to follow ayahuasca dietary regimes by explaining how all indigenous Amazonian shamans have been following the diets for centuries or millennia. This homogenization of Amazonian shamanic diets is part of a larger trend of the ethnic service economy (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009), in which complexities of indigenous knowledge and practice are reduced to that which is comprehensible, permissible, and attractive to a Western mind.

Western ayahuasca diets are a clear example of cultural reductionism, constituted by diverse and novel recipes and beliefs. At the very least, Western-run ayahuasca retreats tend to instruct their ceremony attendees to avoid, for a period of three days before and after drinking ayahuasca, red meat, pork, sugar, spicy foods, coffee, alcohol, illicit drugs, anti-depressant medications, and sexual activities.<sup>4</sup> These substances and activities appear to represent a core series of dietary and behavioral restrictions across what may be loosely termed the “Western ayahuasca dieta.” Many ayahuasca retreats or centers dictate much larger lists of restrictions. Some list over 100 foods and substances that must be avoided and may also proscribe extra behaviors, such as a prohibition of “overstimulation of any kind: sexual, violent films, stressful and toxic environments.” One retreat explained to its members, “If the foods you are eating during the diet are not boring, then you are probably doing it wrong.” (See Appendix 1 for a list of dietary and behavioral restrictions issued to participants by an ayahuasca center in the United States.)

Western ayahuasca drinkers provide various reasons for undertaking the diet and behavioral restrictions. Some reasons are more metaphysical in orientation and include the perspective that the ayahuasca plant spirits are more receptive to a purified body subject to the diet, and that ayahuasca may become jealous if the participant engages in sexual activities in the period before the ceremonies. Along this line of reasoning, fears of psychological and spiritual danger sometimes enforce an absolute necessity to follow the diet. One popular Peruvian ayahuasca healing center informs its

participants that if they transgress the dietary taboos, they run the risk of creating “severe psychological and energetic damage” for themselves, possibly making their own psyche beyond repair. The retreat uses a metaphor, explaining how the mirror of the soul may become smashed and scrambled if exposed to the visionary energies of ayahuasca without following the dieta – a disintegration that even experienced indigenous healers are said to struggle to heal.

The other dominant reasons for the need to follow the ayahuasca diet is scientific in basis and involves ideas about risks associated with the biochemical function of beta-carbolines present in the ayahuasca vine. The appropriation of biomedical knowledge about the effects of ayahuasca by indigenous, mestizo, and gringo healers has resulted in novel discourses and justification for dieting for Western ayahuasca drinkers in the context of contemporary vegetalismo. Labate explains how the “scientization” of ayahuasca dieting has brought Western medical specialists into some arenas of ayahuasca politics, impacting notions of shamanic safety and legitimacy (Labate, 2014, pp. 190–192). Molecules in the ayahuasca brew are known to inhibit enzymes in the stomach that regulate the intake of serotonin and other neurotransmitters. Some scientists argue that ayahuasca can open the subject to forms of poisoning if combined with the chemical tyramine, which is found in various typically benign foods (Brush et al., 2004). Scientists have argued that eating certain foods immediately prior to drinking ayahuasca could potentially cause hypertension and, in addition, that certain anti-depressant medications may occasion the potentially deadly condition of serotonin syndrome (dos Santos, 2013, p. 72). Yet, there is no conclusive evidence for these risks, and some scientists, such as Luis Fernando Tófoli at the Psychedelic Science Conference in 2013, argue the risks have been exaggerated (Tófoli, 2013). This ambiguity around the biological safety of drinking ayahuasca has been acknowledged by some Western ayahuasca drinkers and ritual specialists who claim the diet is not important with regard to biological risk, but that it is good for spiritual and psychological reasons alone. With regard to this line of reasoning, they tend to argue that undergoing the dieta will help the individual accept the group leader and the cultural context and surrender to and accept psychologically challenging aspects of the ayahuasca experience.

Westerners tend to understand the ayahuasca diet, in its most basic sense, as means of developing a better relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca, “Mother Ayahuasca,” a plant native to a foreign environment, possibly thousands of miles away, in the Amazon Rainforest. In a minority of cases, Westerners develop relationships, or “do dietas,” with other plants, too. For instance, Kevin Furnas, a citizen of the United States who spent several years in Iquitos and surrounding areas drinking ayahuasca, stated:

I was dieting with a tree called *remocaspi*. This tree, indeed, went to Australia and talked to the spirit of the trees there, and brought back

the spirit of an acacia tree . . . this tree, this voice, introduced itself and it was the acacia tree . . . I was given a song [from the spirit] and the tree was interested in some sort of relationship through the diet process.  
(Razam, 2010, p. 72)

This less common approach to dieting begins to approximate native Amazonian practices of communicating with nonhuman entities of the local environment. Kevin described his practice, stating, “dieting is a means by which we achieve an inter-species relationship. Basically if whatever you’re dieting with agrees to work with you twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it will help you and guide you” (2010, p. 102). While rare, some ayahuasca drinkers in Australia and the United States add leaves or bark or other natural objects from their local environments to ayahuasca mixes in order to diet with, and learn from, plants in their local environment.

Western ayahuasca dieting practices are undertaken with the hopes of bringing about greater spiritual insights and deeper healing for the drinker. Dieting, in this context, does not simply refer to biological acts, but also to mental activity. One popular ayahuasca retreat explains how the diet also includes “being mindful of certain behaviors and habits that might cloud or scramble our energy.” The integration of mental and bodily phenomena is important here; various forms of social and cultural import of the body are cued in the period before the rituals through practices of food and sexual abstinence. Combined with the restrictions on drug and alcohol consumption, the period of several days before and after ayahuasca ceremonies intervene upon typical everyday activities of the drinker. By omitting sexual activities, drug and alcohol consumption, and a large variety of foods, ayahuasca drinkers are avoiding substances and practices that may “pollute” or “corrupt” the body and the effects of ayahuasca.

Western ayahuasca ceremonies often begin with a ritual process in which participants individually orate to the group their personal “intentions for the journey,” a discursive field that involves individuals articulating personally designed desires for specific forms of healing and insight. The asceticism practiced in the period before ayahuasca ceremonies is referred to by ayahuasca drinkers as a means of preparing them in ways that will benefit their ayahuasca experience, and these benefits are understood to manifest through the coalescing of the practice of asceticism with the individual’s ceremony intentions. For example, John, a regular ayahuasca drinker in Australia, stated:

When dieting I associate my intention with the dietary sacrifices in terms of using them as a reminder. As I reach for anything that is restricted and remember that “I can’t have that,” the immediate following thought is “remember your intention.” Then when confronted with the sudden and intense flavour of the medicine (ayahuasca) in ceremony my body

takes it as the signal to go seeking the chosen intention actively during the session.

Practicing the diet and sexual abstinence in the days before a ceremony may be described as a means of spiritually informing the coming ayahuasca journey through the intentions the drinker brings to it. Western ayahuasca drinkers may report a connection to the spirit or effects of ayahuasca the week before a ceremony that may include subtle changes in perceptions and feelings, dream content relating to their intentions, and in some cases, acts of purging and revelatory insight. For example, one drinker stated, “The journey usually starts up to three days before ceremony for me. Quite often, I can be journeying beforehand, feeling sick, psychic purging, dealing with fear.” Another informant stated, “sometimes the journey spontaneously starts well before the ceremonies do. I can have unexplained outpourings of emotion, things that bubble to the surface then get processed during the actual journeys.”

The encoding of motivations for drinking ayahuasca is individually disciplined with the body, representing a process by which meaning devised by the individual in the form of “intentions” is materialized in dietary and somatic regimes that inform the individual’s ayahuasca experiences and visions. The contents of ayahuasca visions are shaped through a medium of ascetic practices in which drinkers encode and cue specialized desires for healing and wisdom linked to everyday social life.

When people in Western contexts drink ayahuasca, they usually do not also undergo extended periods of social isolation. Drinkers may travel directly from work environments on a Friday afternoon to attend an ayahuasca ceremony during the Friday and Saturday evenings and return to work and regular social environments on the following Monday. Returning to these everyday social spaces is common in the style of Western ayahuasca drinking and is sometimes known among ayahuasca drinkers as the “social diet” (Labate, 2014, p. 202), whereby attending work and regular social events prior to, and shortly after, drinking ayahuasca is permitted. We have met North Americans who have conducted year-long “social diets” in their hometown, imposing strict food and behavior restrictions while working regular jobs.

The period immediately after a Western ayahuasca retreat involves what drinkers term “integration.” Integration is an ideal in which drinkers attempt to transform their thinking, behavior, and habits based on insights and healing gained while drinking ayahuasca. Integration is a diffuse concept, widely used, yet not explicitly defined. It has recently gained increasing popularity, as a network of medical experts, social forums, websites, and conferences around it have emerged. Integration may refer to post-ceremony group ritual activity – in the form of “integration circles” – or lists of principles for individuals to follow in their own space and time.

Techniques of integration include materializing significant life choices, “journaling,” undergoing therapies of different kinds, such as psychotherapy, massage, Reiki, and sensory deprivation float tanks, creating art and aesthetic expressions, and spiritual activities such as prayer or meditation. The reception of knowledge, spiritual insight, and healing in the form of ayahuasca visions, or the purging of afflictive conditions during ceremonies, can be conceptualized as parts of a general technology of the self that relate closely with the drinkers’ everyday lives outside ceremony retreats. The articulations of wisdom and healing that drinkers describe receiving from ayahuasca visions, or articulations of spiritual purification from ayahuasca purging, may include reevaluations and re-articulations of social life with regard to significant others who were not present at the retreats. In many cases, drinkers describe receiving forms of advice and healing from ayahuasca that concern domains internal to family, friend, and workplace relations; yet the people in these domains – that the practice of self-healing objectifies – might be unaware that their family member, friend, or work colleague drinks ayahuasca. In this sense, the practice of ayahuasca healing and personal development can be isolated and hidden from the individual’s everyday social existence.

Ayahuasca ceremonies and circles attended by Westerners are typically located in natural environments beyond the edges of the city. They are also often located beyond the consciousness of the social world the individuals inhabit during their everyday lives. The reasons ayahuasca use becomes socially private and hidden appear to be the result of several factors. Given that ayahuasca is illegal in most countries, individuals are more likely to hide the knowledge of their ayahuasca drinking from people who do not share the practice. The risks of being shamed, ridiculed, or even persecuted, therefore, contribute to an overall individualization of the ayahuasca experience and support its psychological corollary of doing “inner personal work” and the need to privately integrate this work into everyday life. This idea is often accompanied by the ideology that, in indigenous societies, “integration” is not necessary because the use of ayahuasca is “already part of culture.”

The ideal of integration represents an attempt to harvest the spiritual and healing fruits generated by the food restrictions and behavioral regimes of the diet and the ayahuasca experiences itself. It also works to bridge the chasm created by a spiritual system that separates the sacred, mystical realities of ayahuasca ceremonies from the profane or everyday environment of living and working in Western social contexts. The environment of the Western ayahuasca dieta appears to be primarily an individual psychological environment that drinkers encounter in visions. These encounters then undergo transformation within the collectively mediated discourses of “sharing circles.” Finally, the individual then attempts to bring these transformations to their everyday social environment in terms defined ultimately by the individual and their particular practices of integration.

## Conclusions

What happens when concepts and practices of indigenous Amazonian shamanism are domesticated to domains of Western common sense making? It is difficult to imagine how the notions of assault sorcery and the complexities around dietary restrictions and behavioral regimes in Amazonian food shamanism addressed in the first part of this chapter could be generously domesticated to the ontological interiorities of Western minds and bodies. Yet, there are confident attempts made by Westerners to conflate various beliefs and philosophies of Amazonian shamanism with modes of understanding that constitute the realities of Western ayahuasca drinkers. It is not uncommon to hear sorcery or soul-loss explained as, and equated to, medical diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder. In this way, the Western ayahuasca drinker builds an epistemological bridge that works to explain why “the native” is not wrong or barbaric in believing in notions of sorcery. Without conceptual tools to adapt or translate sorcery into acceptable Western modes of thought, the corresponding ideas of ayahuasca shamanism being a time-honored practice of wise, powerful, and spiritually virtuous Indians related to the forces of the Amazon forest becomes disempowered. The need for such reasoning is due, partly, to the pervasive nature of sorcery among vegetalismo shamanism that pervades the ayahuasca tourism industry. However, whereas sorcery in Western or global ayahuasca circles tends to be absent and codified as purely an immoral “dark” practice, linked to the selfish proclivities of malevolent shamans, anthropologists of indigenous Amazonia have indicated roles sorcery plays in the ontological basis for society and in balancing inequalities and contesting injustice. This moral reality of sorcery is tied to the same cosmological postulates of cultural and natural reproduction that inform the cosmonomics of Amazonian food shamanism.

As is the case with sorcery, the idea that all foods are potentially means by which spirits of nature may take revenge on humans who have procured too much food from the environment and violated food taboos has not been adopted by Western ayahuasca drinkers, despite being central to indigenous Amazonian shamanism. Not only have Western ayahuasca drinkers not adopted it, they appear to have no consciousness of it. Indigenous reasons for dieting when drinking ayahuasca may have been rendered unimportant by vegetalismo shamans who train and provide healing services to Westerners.

Despite the reinvention of dietary practices linked to ayahuasca use by Westerners users, as we have seen, there are also salient continuities, as some indigenous concepts and perspectives are adopted, such as the idea that there is an invisible world; that plants are spirits who can teach or heal, and that they have their own demands or idiosyncrasies.

The dietary and behavioral restrictions surrounding ayahuasca use among indigenous Amazonian settlements tend to encode tensions of intra-settlement and human-environment relations involving human and non-human spiritual

agents of the immediate environment. Ayahuasca dieting emerged from societies in which the tasks of procuring foods involve living within a personhood-rich environment that dialectically informs cosmological and political conditions of everyday social life. In contrast, the environment of the Western ayahuasca diet appears to foreground a kind of psychological terrain in which a person's journey towards healing is largely private and mediated in terms defined by the individual. This mediation unfolds through bodily taboos and ayahuasca experiences. The taboos and mystical experiences contribute to achieving the ultimate goal of healing individuals who are embedded in social and economic environments characterized by profane or secular social spaces and alienated modes of food production linked to modern capitalism. The preparation for, and integration of, ayahuasca experiences in Western contexts is premised upon distinctions of sacred and profane that separate conceptions of ayahuasca visions and a spiritual (Mother) nature from the synthetic and spiritually-impooverished environments of urban modern existence. Given that individuals are mentally and emotionally "integrated" with the economic and social environments of their societies, any time-honored shamanic beliefs that mediate economic and social life within potent ecological environments will likely remain an exotic and unachievable ontological alterity for Western ayahuasca drinkers.

## Notes

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- 3 As explored below, the term "cosmonomics" refers to a cultural system whereby a shaman acts as a "cosmic manager controlling the relationships of predation and exchange among different life forms and communities – human and non-human" (Århem, 1996, p. 197).
- 4 Another traditional proscription is the exclusion of women that are menstruating from the diets and ceremonies, largely explained in native categories related to constant economy of exchange and fear of the sprits (see Fotiou, 2010, Labate, 2011, Belanunde, 2006). This is a large topic, and it has divided many healers and contemporary practitioners, some being extremely rigorous about it, while others claiming that they can 'handle' these energies. We have noticed that many centers might adopt strict dietary rules but make an exception for menstruating women, as it becomes challenging to send away female participants who have registered to join the retreats and end up having their period during that time.

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