The Age of The Onanya - Regarding the spread of ayahuasca use throughout the Ucayali basin

Carlos Suárez-Álvarez

Independent scholar, carlos_suarez_@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti

Part of the Archaeological Anthropology Commons, Civic and Community Engagement Commons, Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, Folklore Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, Human Geography Commons, Inequality and Stratification Commons, Latin American Studies Commons, Linguistic Anthropology Commons, Nature and Society Relations Commons, Public Policy Commons, Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons, and the Work, Economy and Organizations Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol19/iss2/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostonz@trinity.edu.
The Age of The Onanya - Regarding the spread of ayahuasca use throughout the Ucayali basin

Carlos Suárez-Álvarez
Independent researcher
Colombia

Let’s think of the spread of ayahuasca use throughout the Ucayali basin as a puzzle. It had one thousand pieces, but, unfortunately, we only have a few left, and some probably belong to another box. First, we need to look everywhere for more. Then, we need to put them in the right spot of each blank space, and, once this is done, we have to determine what the rest of the picture looks like and draw it by hand. This article is, therefore, a little about knowledge, a lot about ignorance, and, in between, mostly about intuition.

Peter Gow was the first to play. In 1994, with his article “River people: shamanism and history in western Amazonia,” Gow suggested that ayahuasca shamanism was a recent phenomenon among the Piro and the Campa of the Bajo Urubamba (the river that forms the Ucayali after meeting the Tambo); its origin could have been the Maynas mission villages, and it probably reached the region during the rubber boom in the early twentieth century, via mestizo populations that migrated to the area. Gow acknowledged that his hypothesis was “somewhat speculative,” but he expected that later research would bring evidence “to back it up” (1994, 32).

In 2011, Brabec de Mori presented a considerable amount of historiographic, ethnographic, linguistic, and musicrological data pointing in that same direction with his article “Tracing hallucinations” (2011a). Brabec proposed that the Shipibo-Conibo people adopted the use of ayahuasca in a “relatively recent” past; he did not specify clearly when, but he suggested that it could have happened as late as the late nineteenth century in the context of the rubber boom, via their Cocama neighbors, who, in turn, would have adopted the use of ayahuasca in the Maynas mission villages. Brabec de Mori’s article was well received and has been frequently cited ever since (e.g., Beyer 2012; Bouso 2012; Gearin 2022; Highpine 2012; Horák et al. 2016; Labate 2011; López-Pavillard 2015; Samorini 2014; Shepard 2014; Taylor 2013) as probable evidence of the recent adoption of ayahuasca in the Ucayali basin.

Glenn Shepard Jr. (2014) also contributed to this hypothesis by referring to the cases of the Yora, who adopted ayahuasca in the 1980s, and the Matsigenka of the Manu, who started to add the Psychotria leaves to their ayahuasca brew in the 1960s.

As a result of these contributions and others we will also discuss, there seems to be a growing consensus—if not an orthodoxy—in contemporary anthropological research that ayahuasca use in the Ucayali basin is a relatively recent phenomenon. In this article, I will present historical, ethnographic, 1 and linguistic data that provide ground for a different interpretation. I will pay special attention to the Shipibo-Conibo case, which is crucial because of their central position in the Ucayali river. If it were demonstrable that they did not use ayahuasca until the nineteenth century—as Brabec argued—there would be a solid base for considering that the rubber boom had a fundamental role in the spread of ayahuasca throughout the region.

I am also aware of the importance of placing this ethnographic discussion in the context of globalization. Ayahuasca has allowed some Indigenous peoples to thrive in the market economy. It is not only a source of income, but also a source of pride. Pushing in favor of the
theory of a recent acquisition by those who consider themselves to hold ancestral ayahuasca wisdom, such as the Shipibo-Conibo or the Cashinawa, erodes the privileged position they maintain in the scenario of ayahuasca globalization. Whether we researchers consider ancient use a source of legitimacy or not is secondary to the fact that both Indigenous shamans and their Western customers/patients do. For them, this ancient use constitutes a guarantee of sophisticated skill and authenticity. Despite this, I also want to make clear that I am not moved by a naïve primitivist view of Indigenous shamanism and lifestyle, so common to ayahuasca tourists, as Fotiou (2010, 2016) and Gearin (2022) have depicted. In fact, in earlier works (Suárez-Álvarez 2015, 2017) I have also pointed out this distortion. That said, maybe primitivists got something right, and the Shipibo-Conibo have actually been using ayahuasca for a long time. I am not in the position to confirm that claim, but at least I bring to the debate new information and an alternative interpretation that strongly questions the hypothesis of a relatively recent distribution of ayahuasca use throughout the Ucayali basin.

A tricky debate

The debate is tricky because different researchers have addressed different questions. Ayahuasca shamanism? Ayahuasca shamanism in the restricted sense that Gow gives to the expression? Ayahuasca brew? Ayahuasca brew with Psychotria? What are we actually debating?

In his 1994 seminal article, Gow referred to the spread of “ayahuasca shamanism,” which he defined, very restrictively, as “the use by a trained shaman of the hallucinogen ayahuasca to diagnose and then cure illness” using “the icaros, the curing songs” (Gow 1994, 93). He explicitly excluded from his “ayahuasca shamanism” category the Sharanaua or Cashinana collective ayahuasca rituals (1994, 110). He also did not make any reference to the very particular use of ayahuasca in shamanic contexts that other anthropologists had depicted for the Arawakan groups of the region, including the Piro (Matteson 1954), the Matsigenka (Baer and Snell 1974), the Asháninka (Weiss 2005), and the Ashéninka (Hvalkof and Veber 2005). All these are also expressions of ayahuasca shamanism, but their exclusion from Gow’s analysis is acceptable as they do not fit into his very restrictive definition. However, there was a critical omission: the case of the Shipibo-Conibo, neighbors of the Piro, whose ayahuasca shamanic system (Cárdenas 1989; Colpron 2004) does fit into Gow’s category: a trained shaman uses ayahuasca to diagnose and cure illness using icaros. However, the Shipibo-Conibo have a very sophisticated vernacular terminology and a number of particular ritual features that, along with the available ethnographic and historiographical data, lead me to reject the hypothesis that they adopted their ayahuasca healing system from the Cocama or the mestizo rubber workers in relatively recent times.

We need to consider that Gow conducted fieldwork in the Bajo Urubamba (Gow 1991, 1994), where people of Piro, Amahuaca, Campa, Quechua, Cocama, white, and mestizo ancestry lived together in comunidades nativas, after a long and complex history of intermarriage that started in the rubber camps and continued in the haciendas for several decades (1991, 252-56). They all became Of mixed blood, the title of Gow’s 1991 ethnography, and shared Spanish as a common language. It is understandable that they also adopted a common shamanic system that, according to Gow’s depiction (1994, 93-94), corresponds ethnographically and terminologically to what Luis Eduardo Luna, in his work about mestizo shamanism in Iquitos (1986), called vegetalismo. However, the term vegetalismo also refers to healing practices that do not incorporate the use of ayahuasca, so I prefer to use the more specific expression curanderismo ayahuasquero mestizo.

If what Gow meant was that the curanderismo ayahuasquero mestizo practiced by the mixed-blood Spanish-speaking populations of the Bajo Urubamba was brought to them by mestizo rubber workers in the early twentieth century, then I could agree. However, Gow was
aiming much higher. In fact, in 2015 he upgraded his initial hypothesis: “In 1994, I proposed that the hallucinogen ayahuasca is a relatively recent addition to the pharmacological and shamanic systems of many Indigenous peoples in Southwestern Amazonia” (Gow 2015: 45). It was no longer about ayahuasca shamanism; it was about ayahuasca.

This upgrade was probably due to the publication, four years earlier, of “Tracing hallucinations,” an article by musicologist Brabec de Mori (2011a), who, taking Gow’s original proposition much further, suggested that both the ayahuasca brew and all forms of ayahuasca shamanic practices—including the Sharanaua and Cashinaua collective rituals, but also the Shipibo-Conibo healing sessions—were relatively recent in the region. In his article, Brabec specified that, when using the word ayahuasca, he would be referring to one particular formula of the ayahuasca brew: Banisteriopsis caapi in combination with Psychotria viridis or Dyplopteris cabrerana (2011a, 24). This is a problematic analytical decision, because early reports of the brew rarely considered the admixtures (Baldo 1920; Barriga Villalba 1924; Costa and Faria 1936; Critchley 1929; Decourt and Lemaire 1930; Gagnepain 1930; Hammerman 1930; Morton 1931; Reinburg 1921; Rusby 1923), which only came to receive attention from the ethnobotanists in the 1960s (Deulofeu 1967; Hochstein and Paradies 1957; Pinkley 1969; Poisson 1965; Schultes 1968; Schultes and Raffauf 1960). As it took ethnographers longer to report its use systematically, if we followed Brabec’s categorization, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to trace the use of “ayahuasca” (as he puts it) before the 1970s. This would invalidate any historiographical analysis, and, ironically, would also exclude from our analysis Gow’s observations, because in “River people” he did not specify any particular ayahuasca formula, and when he did in Of mixed blood, the only ingredient he mentioned was the Banisteriopsis caapi (Gow 1991, 236).

I believe that the origin of Brabec’s concern has to do with his idea that Banisteriopsis without Psychotria would have very limited hallucinogenic or visionary qualities (2011a, 26). In this article, we are going to analyze a number of reports that refer to the ayahuasca brew but do not specify whether or not it contained Psychotria. What they do specify, however, is that it was used in shamanic contexts, and therefore we can presume, as the authors of those reports noted, that it had the hallucinogenic properties Brabec only attributed to the Banisteriopsis/Psychotria formula.

Finally, with his article “Will the real shaman please stand up?,” Glenn Shepard Jr. (2014) focused specifically on the recent adoption of the Psychotria leaves by the Matsigenka of the Manu. He did not question whether they had been using an ayahuasca brew in a shamanic context for a long time—in fact, he seemed to confirm it — but he considered that the recent incorporation of Psychotria reinforced Gow’s theory.

The sum of these contributions has created a context from which emerges a strong convention in the field of ayahuasca research: the use of ayahuasca is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Ucayali basin. But this convention is not well founded; in fact, the opposite seems to be the case, and that is what I am going to argue in the following pages.

**Shamanism in Maynas**

In this section, I will analyze the historiographical records of Maynas with the intention of shedding light on the question of whether “ayahuasca shamanism,” as categorized by Gow, was practiced in the region before the missions had any significant impact on the local societies. This is a crucial point, because both Gow and Brabec situated in the reducciones the origin of the “use by a trained shaman of the hallucinogen ayahuasca to diagnose and then cure illness” using “the icaros”.

For 130 years—from 1638 to their expulsion in 1767—the Jesuit missionaries of Maynas tried to evangelize the Indigenous peoples who lived on the banks and the interfluves of the Upper Amazon, the Napo, the Marañón, the Huallaga, the Tigre, the Ucayali, the Itaya, and,
basically, all the rivers that flow into the Amazon before it meets the Yavari (Golob 1982). These missionaries produced a considerable number of reports about the daily life of the locals. They paid special attention to healing and shamanic practices, and, despite their depictions often being biased by their own beliefs, the reports are a rich source of ethnographic material. In *Informes de jesuitas en el Amazonas*, originally published in 1661 (Figueroa 1986), the missionaries reported the following healing session:

In order to heal, the médico gets inside a mosquito net, into a hammock, besides the patient who is also lying down. There, he sings in a falsetto voice, calling for birds and animals to give them health, or he calls to the soul of the patient, saying: “Do not go, do not go.” For that purpose, he gathers the people of the village to help him sing. After that, he blows on or sucks the painful area, or he applies herbs. (Figueroa 1986, 284)

These observations were made before 1661, in the early stages of the mission, when the influence of evangelization on the local practices was insignificant (Golob 1982). But these observations could also be applied to any ayahuasca ceremony held by Shipibo-Conibo or mestizo people nowadays: public sessions in which specialized healers take care of an individual’s health problems by singing, sucking, and blowing. Overall, Figueroa’s account of the healing system (1986, 279-85) shows a great similarity to present-day practices, for example, in the villagers’ ambiguous consideration of the shamans, who were attributed with the powers of both healing and harming, and the professional status of the healing specialists, who got paid “with the best things they [the patients] have” (1986, 284). The use of ayahuasca was not explicitly mentioned in those early accounts, but we will get to that point in the next section.

Both Gow and Brabec suggested that the present-day configuration of the ayahuasca healing session originated in the reducciones. For Gow, the ayahuasca ceremony “implicitly parodies the Catholic Mass,” and this parody “is most dramatically evident in the way in which the shaman blows tobacco smoke over each little cup of ayahuasca before it is given to the drinkers” (1994, 107). Brabec de Mori agreed with Gow on this point and called these features “Christian camouflage.”

I observed in almost any ayahuasca session that co-drinkers, patients, and present relatives at some point of the session (collectively and/or individually) received a similar “sacrament” by the conducting médico, as he blew tobacco smoke or perfume over the persons’ head, body and – often folded – hands. All this “Christian camouflage” does not seem to have emerged from the intention to disguise the ancient ayahuasca practice within contexts dominated by Christian dogmata, but rather indicates that the practice evolved entirely within these contexts. (Brabec de Mori 2011a, 28-29)

I disagree. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the basic features of what Gow considered ayahuasca shamanism was an innovation that resulted from the interaction with Catholic rituals, including, of course, blowing tobacco smoke over the ayahuasca cup or the head of the participants. Needless to say, blowing is a fundamental feature of western Amazonian shamanism. One of the descriptions of *Informes de jesuitas en el Amazonas*, originally published in 1661, states:

It is very usual that doctors blow on the air between their own hands, rubbing them against each other, and they also blow on the sick part of the patient’s body, passing the hands over them or their heads, for they consider that this way they will heal the ailment. (Figueroa 1986, 283)

Away from the Maynas missions, Reichel-Dolmatoff reported that among the Tukano proper of the Vaupés, the vessel where the ayahuasca was kept had to be “purified with tobacco smoke; in the same way the rod with which the drink will be stirred is purified” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1969, 334). There are many examples of blowing, and blowing tobacco, in the ethnographic literature (e.g., Chaumeil 1998, 151; Mahecha Rubio 2015, 120; Surrallés 2007, 352; Wilbert 1987, 64-122) that question the idea that blowing tobacco smoke over the ayahuasca or the patients is a reaction (and therefore subsequent) to Catholic rituals.
Once again: the basic features of what Gow defined as ayahuasca shamanism (the use by a trained shaman of the hallucinogen ayahuasca to diagnose and then cure illness using icaros) were reported by the missionaries in the early stages of Maynas. Yet, the question of whether ayahuasca was used during those sessions or not remains undetermined. I think we can agree that it is highly probable that some kind of psychoactive plant or preparation was consumed. The question is which one.

**Ayahuasca in Maynas**

How about the brew? Was it already present in Maynas in the first half of the seventeenth century? In this section, I am going to propose that it was, despite the first explicit mention in the historiographical records dating from 1738. In earlier accounts, such as Figueroa’s *Informes* published in 1661, ayahuasca was not mentioned, and the only hallucinogen that the missionaries reported was *campana* (*Brugmansia sp.*). The chronicler, who remarked on the lethal toxicity of this plant, did not associate its consumption with any particular ritual context:

*[Brugmansia] is drunk by whomever wants to foresee, and, being dazed and deprived of the senses, lying face down so that the force of the plant does not suffocate him, he stays like this for three days until the drunkenness is over.* (Figueroa 1986, 281)

Ayahuasca was first mentioned in the missionary Maroni’s *Noticias auténticas del río Marañón*, published in 1738. However, we cannot know whether it was Maroni himself who, in the previous years, had personally witnessed the ayahuasca ceremony. Maroni was not just a chronicler but a historian, who composed his *Noticias* from the documents his fellows had produced since the early stages of the missions (Maroni 1988, 87-88). The passage referring to ayahuasca could have been written by another missionary in the seventeenth century.

Maroni’s explanation of ayahuasca came together with the explanation of the *campana* (Maroni 1988, 172). He explained that both “juices” were used for divinatory purposes, but he specified that ayahuasca was also used to treat common illnesses and headaches. He explained two different contexts of use for the juices, but he did not specify in which context each juice was drunk. First, he reproduced almost word by word what Figueroa had written about the *campana*. Second, he described a healing session conducted by a specialist, where villagers participated drinking the juice and singing in what, once again, resembled a modern ayahuasca ceremony. In his *Historia de las misiones de la Compañía de Jesús en el Marañón español*, written shortly after the expulsion of the Jesuits and based on documents and interviews with the missionaries, Chantre y Herrera (1901, 80) also depicted an ayahuasca ceremony: a public session with singing, the specialist in the hammock, and the sucking and extraction of alien objects.

You will have probably noticed how similar the descriptions of the healing sessions that Maroni and Chantre y Herrera associated with the consumption of ayahuasca are to the description of the healing session that opened the previous section, which was attested by the missionaries before 1661, and in which no plant or preparation of any kind is mentioned. I do not think that it is too speculative to suggest that in those sessions something was also consumed. If that was the case, then what could that have been?

As we have seen, the effects of *Brugmansia* do not allow for this kind of ceremony. Once again, it was another Jesuit missionary Father Juan Magnin who, writing about the *campana*, did not associate any ritual context with its use and remarked on its mortal dangers and the eccentric behavior of the consumer (Maroni 1988, 476). Two hundred and fifty years later, in his ethnography about the Shuar, Harner acknowledged that shamans preferred to use ayahuasca for healing purposes because *Brugmansia* would not allow them to perform the ritual actions of singing, blowing, and interacting with the patients (Harner 1994, 185).
What about other substances? Magnin also referred to the use of curupa, a visionary snuff obtained from a tree of the genre *Anadenanthera*, which, according to him, was mainly used for political purposes: no chanting, no healing (Maroni 1988, 476). Could it have been coca? Most probably not, for I have only found one mention of coca in the *Noticias*, when the Pebas are described to have used it in a baptism ceremony (Maroni 1988, 477).

I can only think of tobacco as one possible alternative to ayahuasca. However, in none of the reports I have consulted regarding Maynas (Chantre y Herrera 1901; Figueroa 1986; Maroni 1988; Uriarte 1986) was tobacco associated with that particular healing context. The missionaries reported that it was used as a remedy or as a stimulant, and in a warfare situation they witnessed “two old men licking tobacco and blowing into the air, as they believe that this produces a spell that inevitably causes death” (Maroni 1988, 446).

Paradoxically, the analysis of tobacco use in Maynas leads us right into what I think is the first description ever of an ayahuasca preparation. Father Lucero reported that Xibaro sorcerers used to drink a juice of “evil herbs that they mix with guayusa and tobacco, also invented by the Demon, and they cook it to the point that the little juice left becomes the quintessence of evil” (Maroni 1988, 329). Doesn’t this look like an ayahuasca preparation? In his ethnography about the Jivaroan Shuar, Harner reported that the healer simultaneously drinks the ayahuasca brew and tobacco water (1994, 193) and the use of guayusa as an emetic (1994, 85).

If what Lucero described was an ayahuasca brew with admixtures, it would be the first mention in the historiographical records: 1683. As the Xibaro had resisted the attempts of the missionaries to concentrate them in the *reducciones*, maybe ayahuasca had been with them for some undetermined but long time period, and it is not unreasonable to think that they were not the only ones in the region who knew about it and used it.

And finally, let’s go back to our pre-1661 chanting, blowing, sucking, public healing ceremony. If we assume that some kind of psychoactive plant or preparation was used in it, my suggestion is that it was ayahuasca. And, consequently, my conclusion is that the use by a trained shaman of the hallucinogen ayahuasca to diagnose and treat illness singing icaros and charging for his work predates Maynas.

**Shipibos and Cocamas in Maynas**

I am now going to leave behind Gow’s 1994 original hypothesis, which was limited to a particular form of ayahuasca use, and I am going to focus on Brabec de Mori’s much more ambitious one that both the ayahuasca brew and all forms of ayahuasca shamanism were introduced in the Ucayali basin in a “relatively recent” past. I will start, in this section, by questioning Brabec de Mori’s proposed path of expansion of the ayahuasca brew. According to him, it was invented by some Western Tukanoan people, and it later spread from the Tukano among the now Kichwa speaking groups that emerged from Jesuit missions in the Ecuadorian and northwestern Peruvian lowlands and among the Kukama. In a second phase it spread among the peoples in the Peruvian north, reaching southwards to the Quechua de Lamas and Shawi populations. The third phase was its journey upriver on the Río Ucayali, probably with the rubber workers. (Brabec de Mori 2011a, 42)

Therefore, the Cocama would have learned ayahuasca shamanism and its associated brew in the context of the missions and would have transmitted it to the Shipibo-Conibo one or two hundred years later, something that also fits with Gow’s proposition. But this model has to face some insuperable obstacles.

During the seventeenth century, the banks of the upper and middle Ucayali were mainly occupied by the Conibo, the Shipibo, and the Shetebo—who would later merge to become the Shipibo-Conibo—whereas the lower stretch of the river was under Cocama control. Despite the distance that separated all of them from the heart of Maynas, in the confluence
of the Huallaga and the Marañón, these groups played a fundamental role in the configuration and evolution of the mission. And this is so because the capital of Maynas, Santiago de la Laguna, was founded in 1669 with populations from the Ucayali: “By a beautiful lake, he [Father Lucero] founded a populated village, which with Cocamas and Chipeos [Shipibos] was more than 1600 souls (and he later added Cocamillas and Panos)” (Maroni 1988, 222).

In fact, the very first villagers were only “xitipos” (Shetebos) and “chipeos” (Shipibos), whom Father Lucero had brought from the Ucayali basin (Maroni 1988, 222). From that moment on, Santiago de la Laguna would become the capital of the Maynas mission and would always be populated by these same ethnic groups. In 1735, there were “four different nations: Cocamas, Cocamillas, Panos, and Chipeos. […] This reducción has today two hundred and twenty families. Almost one thousand souls” (Maroni 1988, 400). In 1790, in the detailed map that Father Sobreviela made of the region, he considered Santiago de la Laguna a Pano village (Izaguirre 1922b, 103). Moreover, at the end of 1827, Henry Lister Maw also found remnants of the Pano population, who, after the expulsion of the Jesuits, “had even gone down to the Ucayali, whence they returned to the Laguna district” (Maw 1829, 159).

During the Jesuit period, the missionaries scattered in the distant mission villages of Maynas would come together in Santiago de la Laguna every two years (Golob 1982, 108). As the missionaries traveled accompanied by Indians from the different nations, this village was the perfect center for exchange and diffusion. It was like a heartbeat: people, things, and knowledge moving from remote areas to Santiago de la Laguna and back on a regular basis. It would have been very difficult for the Shipibo to have missed a medical innovation of this type. Moreover, the Ucayali basin was a strong focus for the missionaries during the seventeenth century (Figueroa 1986; Maroni 1988): between 1686 and 1698, Father Richter founded nine mission villages all along the Ucayali river, as far south as the mouth of the Pachitea river (Chantre y Herrera 1901, 295). The reports of ayahuasca drinking included in Maroni’s Noticias and Chantre y Herrera’s Historia did not refer to any specific people or location and could have been made in the Ucayali basin, in Santiago de la Laguna, or elsewhere.

The close relationship between the Cocama and the Panoan groups of the Ucayali was not limited to their vicinity in Santiago de la Laguna. As early as 1666, a Shipibo-Cocama military alliance—which had been raiding the missionaries for several years in the Huallaga and the Marañón—killed Father Figueroa, then the head of the Maynas mission (Chantre y Herrera 1901, 224-31). In 1698, the death of Father Richter and a number of Spaniards who were in the reducciones of the Ucayali was attributed to a coalition of Shipibos, Conibos, Cocamas, and Piros and said to be a result of their discontent over their forced participation in the Xibaro campaign (Maroni 1988, 298).

Besides this close relationship, I must remark that I have not found any historiographical data (Amich 1988; Biedma 1989; Chantre y Herrera 1901; Figueroa 1986; Golob 1982; Izaguirre 1922a, 1922b; Maroni 1988; Uriarte 1986) suggesting a context in which ayahuasca knowledge would have been acquired by the Shipibo one or two hundred years later than by the Cocama. If the Cocama got to know it in the missions in the first phase, the only plausible hypothesis we could formulate from the available sources is that the Shipibo-Conibo did, too. However, I would not formulate such a hypothesis, because there is not one single piece of evidence supporting the idea that ayahuasca was not known in the Maynas area, including the Ucayali basin, before the arrival of the missionaries.

**Reports in the nineteenth century**

The first explicit mention of ayahuasca use in the Ucayali basin dates from 1861. This has sometimes been interpreted as an indication of its recent introduction to the region and the areas further to the south. In this section, I will analyze the historiographical sources produced...
by missionaries and travelers, explain probable reasons for that omission, and suggest that earlier reports did actually depict ayahuasca use.

The evangelization of the Ucayali was entrusted to Franciscan missionaries. In the seventeenth century, their attempt to establish mission villages ended with the death of the missionaries; the information they produced was scarce, and none was related to shamanism or healing practices (Biedma 1989; Izaguirre 1922a). It was not until the 1760s that the Franciscans got to establish their first mission villages, which only lasted seven years and also ended with the death of all sixteen missionaries who were living in different villages among the Shetebo, Shipibo, and Conibo. In their reports, there is no mention of ayahuasca, but there is also no mention of any shamanic plant or ritual at all (Izaguirre 1922b). Could we then deduce that among those groups there were no shamanic rituals or plants, including tobacco, which is not mentioned either?

From 1791, when the Franciscans resettled in the Ucayali basin, to the end of the nineteenth century, among the numerous reports produced by different missionaries, I have only found two fragments that refer to Shipibo-Conibo shamanic practices. In the first, from 1807, Father Alcántara (quoted in Tournon 2002, 70) witnessed among the Conibo a sucking-and-tobacco-smoking healing session. This practice is also common nowadays in any Shipibo village (Suárez-Álvarez 2021, 395) and usually takes place in different contexts than the ayahuasca sessions. In the second mention of shamanic practices, from the 1850s, Father Pallarés reported a “religious” ritual led by a Shipibo specialist, the *muraya*. The session was public, the partakers sang along, and the *muraya* smoked a tobacco pipe, but the missionary did not report the use of ayahuasca (Izaguirre 1922c, 210).

We cannot deduce from these reports whether or not there was ayahuasca in the Ucayali. But before 1861, the date of the first mention of ayahuasca use in the Ucayali basin, there are two depictions that, although they do not explicitly mention ayahuasca, could very well refer to it. These observations were made by Paul Marcoy, who traveled throughout the region during the 1840s. Among the Campa, a term that was used in the past to refer to the Arawakan populations of the Urubamba and the Tambo, the rivers that merge to form the Ucayali (Barclay and Santos Granero 2005), Marcoy acknowledged the existence of “doctors” who used “*breuvages narcotiques ou de violents drastiques*” to “plunge the patient into a deep sleep” (Marcoy 1869, 580). The reason I use the original French is because in the nineteenth century, the adjective *drastique* was used as a noun with the meaning of *purgative* (Ortolang 2012). Marcoy depicted a purgative and narcotic medicine back in the nineteenth century, and the Arawakan populations of the area do currently have a purgative and narcotic medicine used in shamanic contexts: *kamalampi* or *kamarampi*, which several authors translate as “medicine to vomit” (Rosengren 2004, 49; Shepard 2014, 22) or simply “to vomit” (Baer and Snell 1974, 76; Pimenta 2005; Weiss 1975, 246), also known in the rest of the world as ayahuasca. It could be argued that tobacco can also produce emetic effects; however, regarding the Arawakan groups, Glenn Shepard Jr. (1998), who made a detailed depiction of the use of psychoactive plants among the Arawakan Matsigenka, did not associate tobacco consumption with vomiting.

Marcayo also reported that among the Conibo, the *yubué*, whom he described as “sorcerers, jugglers and doctors,” used a narcotic to enter a lethargic state and communicate with a spiritual entity (Marcoy 1869, 670). Note that in both cases, Marcoy used the word *médecin*, “doctor,” to refer to those specialists, which would suggest their therapeutic role.

The use of *camalampi*—and its vomiting, narcotic, and therapeutic properties—was explicitly reported by Ernest Granddier, a French traveler who visited the Campa in the late 1850s. Granddier wrote that *camalampi*, “a climbing plant,” was boiled until “a very energetic purgative” was obtained. “When a patient has taken this drink, he is inebriated, his head spins, he believes he is flying through the air, he is subject to strange visions” (Granddier 1861,
Beyond its pharmacological properties, Grandidier (1861, 144) also paid attention to the *camalampi* specialist and to the context of use. “Doctors […] who use *camalampi* to treat their patients are specially respected,” wrote Grandidier.

These doctors practice their art by singing; they drink the *camalampi* with the patient they are treating, and, after approaching their mouth to the sick part, they extract a bone or a piece of wood (*chonta*) and convince the Indian that his suffering had no other cause. (ibid.)

And finally: “The price of healing is an axe, beads or knives: whatever the doctor asks for, he obtains” (ibid.). Is this or is this not “the use by a trained shaman of the hallucinogenic ayahuasca to diagnose and then cure illness” using “the curing songs” and charging for his work?

In 1874, we find a third report that also seems to refer to ayahuasca in a shamanic context among the Piro of the Urubamba, ancestors of the people whom Gow studied one century later. Father Luis Sabaté depicted a shamanic initiation: the apprentice had to live isolated in the forest, keep a severe fast, and smoke tobacco. On top of this, the *maestro* visited him every night to make him vomit (Izaguirre 1922d, 260). Although Sabaté does not mention ayahuasca or any other preparation consumed during those vomiting sessions, I suggest that the shamans did not stick their fingers down their apprentices’ throats. I am aware that among the Arawakan groups of the region, tobacco occupies a central role in the act of healing, but the literature is also quite unanimous that during shamanic training, drinking ayahuasca under the guidance of a *maestro* is fundamental, as Weiss reported for the Asháninka (2005, 40), Hvalkof and Veber for the Ashéninka (2005, 259), Matteson for the Piro (1954, 75), and Baer and Snell for the Matsigenka (1974, 68).

Whether the vomiting Sabaté reported was caused by ayahuasca or not I leave to your judgment, but there is no doubt that in 1883–1884 Samanez y Ocampo, in his exploration of the Apurimac, Ene, and Tambo rivers, reported that the Campa used several narcotics, highlighting the *camalampi*, which was drunk “to solve some serious matters” (Samanez y Ocampo 1885, 31). One night, there was a *camalampi* session in which both men and women “sang the whole night in a strange and funereal tone” (1885, 60).

Altogether, the reports made by Marcoy, Grandidier, Sabaté, and Samanez y Ocampo suggest a well-established use of ayahuasca in shamanic contexts—both in collective and therapeutic sessions—before and in the early stages of the rubber boom. It is true that during the preceding decades, mestizo populations were migrating to the area, but it is highly unlikely that by the 1850s their influence had completely reconfigured the shamanic practices of the Campa. The historiographical records also question this idea: in none of the documents I have been able to review is there one single mention of ayahuasca use by mestizo populations. It is particularly significant that Samanez y Ocampo, who spent most of his sixteen-month trip in rubber camps and mestizo villages and depicted in detail the people and their lifestyle, does not give account of ayahuasca use in those contexts. This leads me to formulate a key question. Historiographical records have been used to determine whether ayahuasca was or was not used among the Indigenous populations of the Ucayali, but, what would happen if we used those same sources to trace the use of ayahuasca among the mestizo population? When was the first mention in their case? When could we then deduce that they started to use ayahuasca?

**Early ethnographic evidences**

The reports produced by professional ethnographers in the early twentieth century will allow us, in this section, to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of ayahuasca use in the area of our interest one hundred years ago.
We need to move to the east of the Ucayali basin to find the first mention of ayahuasca use among a Panoan group: the Cashinaua (also known as Huni Kuin), who inhabit the headwaters of the Purús and Juruá rivers in the border between Peru and Brazil. Although Capistrano de Abreu’s work on the language of the Cashinaua was published in 1914, it was written in 1909 after exhaustive interviews with two young Cashinaua informants who had been away from their territory for three and four years respectively. Therefore, the ethnographic present is 1905-1906 (Capistrano de Abreu 1914, 3-7). Capistrano’s work includes a series of mythical narratives in the vernacular language. One of them revolves around the use of huni, the ayahuasca brew, and the subsequent shamanic experience of the man who drinks it and has to endure horrible visions in order to get acquainted with the spirits (Capistrano de Abreu 1914, 413-23).

The Shipibo-Conibo, also a Panoan group, figure as ayahuasca drinkers in the ethnographic work of Tessmann about the Indians of Peru. Tessmann conducted fieldwork during the 1920s in the Ucayali basin and reported that the use of ayahuasca was part of the learning process of “witchcraft” among the Shipibo, Shetebo, and Conibo: “Even boys learn witchcraft,” he wrote (1999, 57). Regarding other groups of the region, Tessmann also reported the use of ayahuasca among the Panoan Amahuaca (1999, 95-96) and the Arawakan Campa (1999, 51). On the other hand, he informed that among the Cocama it was not traditional, although “nowadays, some of them also drink Kaapi = ayawaska” (1999, 42). He reported something similar among the culturally and linguistically related Omagua: “Currently, the aforementioned tree [kurupá, genus Anadenanthera] has been partially replaced by the Kaapi vine, denominated with the (Quechua) word ayawaska” (Tessmann 1999, 32). And it is not just Tessmann in the 1920s. In his article “Tracing hallucinations,” Brabec de Mori, in an endnote, reports that anthropologist Roxani Rivas Ruiz, whose doctoral dissertation focused on Cocama shamanism, acknowledged that the Cocama had told her that “ayahuasca was a new hallucinogen to them” (2011a, 46).

This contrast between a well-established use of ayahuasca among the Panoan and Arawakan groups of the Ucayali basin and its recent incorporation among their Tupian Cocama and Omagua neighbors—who used the Quechua denomination—is of utmost importance, because a cornerstone of Brabec de Mori’s argument about the expansion of ayahuasca throughout the Ucayali basin relies on the assumption that the Cocama, coming from the north, were the agents of expansion. For Tessmann, it was the other way around: the Shipibo-Conibo adopted ayahuasca from their southern neighbors, the Campa (1999, 392). Unfortunately, he did not elaborate on this suggestion, but, as we will see a little later, it resonates with the fact that one of the varieties of the ayahuasca vine in the Shipibo-Conibo botanical classification is called camaranti, which seems to derive from kamarampi, the Arawakan word for ayahuasca.

The power of the others

Let’s now turn our gaze towards contemporary autobiographical narratives. Is it possible to find in them clues for reconstructing the history of the spread of ayahuasca? Brabec de Mori seems to think so. He reports that in the interviews he conducted during his fieldwork, “numerous” Shipibo-Conibo healers told him that they had learned under the guidance of Cocama or mestizo teachers (2011a, 29-30). In his opinion, this would indicate the original mastery of the latter and would support his model of expansion.

Brabec does not specify how many such instances he found, although the reader—at least, that was my case—may think that he means a significant proportion. However, my ethnographic observations point in the opposite direction. None of the several Shipibo-Conibo ayahuasqueros whom I met during my fieldwork on the Pisqui river, in the community of San
Francisco de Yarinacocha, and in the modern ayahuasca retreat centers around Iquitos, had had a Cocama or mestizo ayahuasquero as their main teacher (Suárez-Álvarez 2009, 2010, 2015, 2021); they all learned from family elders or, less frequently, from nonrelated Shipibo maestros. Cárdenas (1989) and Colpron (2004), who sketched the biographies of several Shipibo-Conibo shamans, reported this same pattern, with one exception each. Paradoxically, in his article “From the natives’ point of view”, Brabec de Mori (2014) included the biographies of six Shipibo-Conibo ayahuasqueros, all of whom, even those living in mestizo settlements, seemed to have learned from Shipibo elders.

In case Brabec was not specifically referring to main teachers but also to minor learning experiences, a second analysis might be conducted, as it is quite common for ayahuasqueros to have different maestros throughout their lives. Roger López, my main informant in San Francisco de Yarinacocha, became onanya under the guidance of his grandfather, but was proud of having had a Cocama teacher who taught him “all his secrets” (Suárez-Álvarez 2021, 115). Guillermo Arévalo, the most famous Shipibo-Conibo ayahuasquero, had mestizo, Asháninka, and Piro teachers, besides his family elders (Morin 1998, 383).

This predilection for foreign maestros—whose importance is highlighted in autobiographical narratives—is in tune with ethnological analysis. In *Voix, savoir, pouvoir*, Chaumeil defined shamanism as an integrative and nondogmatic system constantly transcending ethnic boundaries in order to enrich and innovate the shamanic power (1998, 16). Regarding the case of the Yagua, he wrote:

> It is not unusual that, having made a trip to the border with Brazil, the shamans refer to or introduce in their practice elements they saw in the area. Often, the shaman has a specific knowledge of the outer world, something that reinforces their knowledge in front of their own people. Traveling beyond traditional frontiers is part of the shamanic quest. (Chaumeil 1998, 125)

In a logical continuation of his argumentation about Cocama teachers, Brabec de Mori also reports that “Kukama are generally perceived as very powerful and dangerous ayahuasqueros by the Shipibo” (2011a, 30), a perception that, once again, would back up his model. But this kind of admiration for someone else’s shamanic power is widespread in western Amazonia. Chaumeil showed how Yagua shamans got their “special telephone,” a tool used in shamanic healing, from the Shipibo, who are considered by the Yagua to be great shamans, specialists in “subaquatic shamanism” (1998, 28). Chaumeil also noticed the reciprocal admiration between mestizo and Indigenous populations (1998, 276). The same goes for the Achuar, for whom ayahuasca is also a fundamental feature of the shamanic/healing system (Uriarte 2007, 38): “The Achuar think that the Canelos-quichua shamans of the Pastaza [...] the Tupi speaking Cocama-Cocamilla [...] and the viákatch (‘mestizo sorcerers’) [...] control a greater and better shamanic power” (Uriarte 2007, 106). Meanwhile,

> On several occasions, when we had Indigenous visitors at our home in Iquitos (Achuar, Secoya, Napuruna), many urban mestizo inhabitants came to ask them for healing […] for they consider that their supernatural powers are greater than those of the mestizos. (Uriarte 2007, 106)

Michael Harner reported that the Shuar admired the shamanic power of the Canelo because they possessed the tséntsak (magical darts) of the “white people” (Harner, 1994). Regarding the Quijos of the Upper Napo, Oberem reported that in the nineteenth century, the Quijo believed that the Zaparo sorcerers were more powerful (Oberem 1980, 279).

For all these reasons, I question the idea that the presence of Cocama or mestizo teachers in the autobiographical narratives of some Shipibo-Conibo healers, and their explicit admiration for those foreign shamanic powers, can be interpreted as an echo of a historical process; instead, it should be considered as a generalized characteristic of how people represent their own shamanic systems in western Amazonia.
Mythic-historical narratives

How about myths? Can we trace the history of ayahuasca in myths? Jonathan Hill in *Rethinking history and myth* (1988), and Fausto and Heckenberger in *Time and memory in modern Amazonia* (2007), pointed out the complex intertanglement of myth and history in Indigenous narratives. Aware of this difficulty, I will now analyze several myths regarding the acquisition of ayahuasca among the Shipibo-Conibo.

During my fieldwork, I registered different stories that explained the origin of ayahuasca. The first one, which was told to me on several occasions, and which is also found in the ethnographic literature (Tournon 2013, 236), says that the Inca granted ayahuasca to the Shipibo. If we tried to make a historical interpretation of this myth, we could speculate with the idea that the Incas would have found the brew in any of the trade posts they had in the Andean Piedmont up north and would have brought it down south to trade with the Shipibo. But then, of course, we would also need to explain how this happened with the rest of the basic cultural features of the Shipibo, because, as Santos Granero points out in *Etnohistoria de la alta Amazonia*:

> The generous Inka taught the Shipibo to spin and weave, to make canoes, arrows, bows, and harpoons. He also taught them the designs and the shamanic arts. It was Cori Inka, the source of all knowledge, and with him are associated the fundamental arts for social life. (Santos Granero 1992, 285)

Another story I collected in the course of my fieldwork points to the influence of Catholicism:

> A meraya [great shaman] who had dieted with all the master plants was so wise that he challenged the Lord Jesus: he went up to Heaven and asked to sit beside Him. Jesus, as a punishment for this insolence, sent him back to Earth and planted him in the soil, where he became the ayahuasca vine. (Suárez-Álvarez 2021, 352)

Following this story, we could feel justified to situate the source of ayahuasca in the reducciones, something that would support Gow’s and Brabec’s hypotheses. However, a third story takes us right in the opposite direction: there was a savage whose name was Amohuaca—the ethnonym of a Panoan interfluvial “uncivilized” group—who constantly drank the ayahuasca brew until he became the vine (López Flórez and Cuglievan 2012, 134). This version is somewhat close to one Tastevin found among the Cashinahua, who told him that they had received the brew from the Yaminahua, who are perceived as the epitome of the wild Indian (Tastevin 1925, 414).

Brabec de Mori also reported a fourth story: “A very powerful healer from downriver, his name was Agustín Murayari, after his death transformed into the ayahuasca liana” (Brabec de Mori 2011a, 29). Brabec argues that, as Murayari is a typical Cocama last name, the word *meraya*—which the Shipibo-Conibo use to designate the role of their most skilled shaman—is of Cocama origin, an echo of Murayari, the mythical healer from downriver who delivered the ayahuasca to the Shipibo-Conibo. This hypothesis is further elaborated in Roxani Rivas Ruiz’s ethnography about Cocama shamanism. She argues that the Murayari family was important in the Cocama shamanic tradition, so the whole group adopted the diminutive “murayo” to designate shamans, and, given the great influence the Cocama had on the Shipibo-Conibo, the latter would have incorporated the word (Rivas Ruiz 2011, 176).

However, the researchers who have addressed the etymology of *meraya* (Colpron 2004; Morin 1998; Tournon 2002), in line with the Shipibo-Conibo dictionary published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Loriot et al. 1993), consider that *meraya* is a word of Shipibo-Conibo origin whose meaning is “the one who finds” or “the one who visits,” from the vernacular root verb *mera*—“to visit” or “to find,” and the suffix *–ya*, which, added to any root, indicates “with” or “that has.” The dispute among scholars—Loriot, Tournon, Faust,
Bertrand-Rousseau, Gebhart-Sayer, Illius—is whether meraya means “the one who visits” or “the one who finds” (Morin 1998, 419). In addition, the Handbook of South American Indians (Steward and Métraux 1948, 592) reports that mueraya is the Conibo word both for God and for shaman, whereas the Shipibo word for shaman is mucroya. In 1912, César Díaz Castañeda, in his depiction of the Conibo, also used the word mueraya to refer to the healer/chief (Izaguirre 1922a, 314). In the 1850s, Father Pallarés used the word muraya to refer to a Shipibo religious specialist (Izaguirre 1922c, 210). Moreover, the word has also been integrated into the Spanish dialect of the region as an archetype of the shaman who has reached the ultimate level of shamansic power. In fact, Gow also reported its use among the mixed-blood Spanish-speaking population of the Bajo Urubamba he studied as a synonym for the most powerful shaman.

We could argue that Brabec’s informant chose to use the last name Murayari in the narrative because of its resemblance to meraya, but even if it was an implicit reference to the Cocama, what would we make of the other narratives? They take us in each of the four possible directions we could actually go: the interfluvial “wild Indian,” the powerful riverine Indigenous neighbor, the Inca, and the mission villages. I will not be the one to disentangle history from myth in this series.

Ayahuasca terminology

The terminology associated with ayahuasca in the Shipibo-Conibo and other Panoan languages is deeply rooted in the medical system of each, and its sophistication suggests a long history of use.

In Shipibo-Conibo, the ayahuasca vine is generically known as nishi, which in the SIL dictionary has four meanings (Loriot et al. 1993): the first is “vine,” the second and the third also refer generically to other vine-like categories of plants, and the fourth is “ayahuasca.” Further on, the dictionary offers twenty-one examples of nishi plants, the names for which are created by adding other words to nishi. Ayahuasca is the only one that does not require this kind of specification, it is the nishi par excellence. This is, however, a minor point.

In his article “El ayahuasca y el curandero Shipibo-Conibo del Ucayali (Peru),” Guillermo Arévalo (1986), a well-known ayahuasquero, explains that the term for the vine and/or the brew is nishi, oni, or nishi oni. Arévalo reports a complex botanical classification with four main varieties and several subvarieties (1986, 148-50).

The first variety is nishicon, or onicon. The suffix –con means “true.” It is the “legitimate” ayahuasca vine and has three subvarieties, each one with several botanical and medical particularities. The term nishicon is also reported by Morin (1998).

The second variety is camaranti, which grows in the interfluve and presents three subvarieties. As we have seen, the word camaranti is most probably of Arawakan origin, from further up-river. According to Brabec’s theory, the Shipibo-Conibo received ayahuasca knowledge from the opposite direction, but—in line with Tessmann’s hypothesis—this loan could also suggest something else.

The third variety is chahua, which is found in the interfluvial forest but also in gardens. It presents three subvarieties with particular shamanic properties. The word chahua, spelled tsawua, is also found in Tessmann’s work (1999, 57) about the Shipibo, Conibo, and Shetebo, as a synonym for the brew.

The fourth variety is chai, “brother-in-law”, which looks like the rest of the ayahuasca vines but does not have any hallucinogenic or toxic properties.

Regarding the brew, the Shipibo-Conibo call it nishi “vine”, oni (whose etymology we will analyze below), or nishi oni (Cárdenas 1989), and Tessman in the 1920s reported the
use of tsawua (1999, 57). Among the Panoan neighbors, the Sharanahua have at least three denominations: shori, “to undress” (Déleage 2005, 195, 233), ondi, and rami (Siskind, quoted in Luz, 1996). The Yaminahua call it shori (Townsley 1994, 320) or rabi, “transformation” (Pérez Gil 2006, 117, 161). Among the Cashinau, it can be called nixi pae, “vine drunkenness” (Kensinger et al. 1970, 8), huni, “people”, dunuan isun, “anaconda urine” (Lagrou 1991, 164), and muka këné, “bitter design” or “bitter area” (Deshayes and Keifenheim, quoted in Erikson 1999, 269). The Marubo call it oni (Cesarino 2008, 38) and the Yawanawa call it uni (Ferreira Oliveira 2018, 169). Finally, according to Lagrou (2018, 21), several Panoan groups call it dami, which in Cashinau can be translated as “transformation” or “puppet” (Lagrou 1991, 140; 2018, 21). This array contrasts, for example, with the Western Tukanoan peoples—who some researchers consider to be the inventors and first spreaders of the brew—who show a surprising scarcity of vernacular names for the brew and the vine. The Mai Huna (Bellier 1994, 157), the Siona-Secoya of the Upper Napo basin (Vickers 1989, 168), the Siona of the Putumayo (Langdon 2014), and their linguistically unrelated ayahuasca drinker neighbors the Kofan (Robinson 1996) use the word yajé/yahé to designate both the brew and the vine. Only Langdon (2014, 148) reported another name for the brew: éco, which literally means “medicine” and might be used to refer to any medicine at all. Paradoxically, according to Reichel-Dolmatoff (1969, 327), the word yajé was generally adopted in northwest Amazonia from the lingua geral.

We will reach the climax of our terminological analysis with the word that designates the second rank in the Shipibo-Conibo shamanic hierarchy: the onanya. The aforementioned powerful meraya is currently considered more of a mythical than an actual shaman, because it is commonly said that there are no merayas anymore. However, in most Shipibo-Conibo villages, people can still rely on their onanya.

The word onanya is formed by onan, “sage” or “to know” (Loriot et al. 1993, 301), and again the suffix –ya, “that has” or “with.” Onanya is usually translated as “the one who has knowledge” (Morin 1998, 377; Tournon 2002, 346), an expression that is used throughout the Amazon in the different vernacular languages and the local Spanish dialect to designate healers (Gow 1991, 238). Note that oni, “ayahuasca brew,” is a word that is derived from the same root: knowledge. In this way, for the Shipibo-Conibo, healing, knowledge, and ayahuasca come together in the figure of the shaman. Moreover, according to the SIL linguist Olive Shell (1975, 161), oni is the Protopanoan term for “person.” In Shipibo-Conibo, oni means “ayahuasca” and joni means “human” (Loriot et al. 1993); among the Cashinahua, the word for ayahuasca is huni, which also means “man” (Capistrano de Abreu 1914, 413-23) or “people” (Lagrou 1991, 164). Therefore, maybe ayahuasca is not only sustaining the architecture of knowledge and the medical system among some Panoan groups, but also their ontological foundations. Imagine this association: ayahuasca, people, knowledge, health.

The music: ikaros and icaros

I have participated in ayahuasca ceremonies with mestizo, Cocama, and Shipibo-Conibo ayahuasqueros, in villages located along the axis that stretches from the Brazilian-Colombian-Peruvian border in the Amazon river to Iquitos and further up the Ucayali river to Shipibo-Conibo territory. Although the ceremonies were all quite similar—public sessions at night, singing, tobacco smoking, blowing and sucking, payment—I always felt a difference between the Shipibo-Conibo ceremonies and the rest: the music, I thought, was clearly different.

But then I read Brabec de Mori’s analysis (2011a, 35-42) suggesting that the Shipibo-Conibo icaros were similar to the mestizo and the Cocama icaros, and, given his expertise, I simply accepted the idea. This also implied accepting to a great degree the possibility of a recent expansion of ayahuasca shamanism throughout the Ucayali basin via Cocama and mestizo
populations, given that, according to Brabec, if those songs sound similar, it is because they have a recent and common origin, and that they did not come alone, but together with the whole shamanic set of brew and practices they are inextricably linked to.

However, years after its publication, I found out that I had misunderstood “Tracing hallucinations.” What I initially missed was that Brabec was not comparing ayahuasca music nor ayahuasca songs in general, but he was specifically comparing “ikaros.” But, aren’t they the same? Isn’t “ikaro” a synonym for ayahuasca song? Yes, according to most researchers (Beyer 2009; Cárdenas 1989; Dobkin de Ríos 1972; Espinosa 1935; Gow 1994; Luna 1986; Regan 2011) who have studied the ayahuasca shamanic complex of the region, icaros are medical chants, curing songs, sung prayers, magical melodies, whistles, or blows. “The icaros are used ritually but not only in ayahuasca sessions,” explains Luna (1986, 97). “They are also used during the preparation of certain remedies, during curing sessions which take place independently of ayahuasca ceremonies” (Luna 1986, 100).

Regarding the Shipibo, the term icára is given in the SIL dictionary (Loriot et al. 1993, 194) as meaning “songs used to heal.” Rafael Karsten, who conducted fieldwork among the Shipibo in 1952, defined icaro as an “incantation formula that the devil teaches those who ingest the nishi,” that is, ayahuasca (Karsten 1955, 172). Cárdenas, who conducted fieldwork in the 1980s, provides the following definition: “Icaros are the songs (prayed songs), prayers, whistles, and even blows, that the shaman does, whether to call the spirits, drive away bad spirits, consecrate plant remedies or objects, regulate the intensity of the mareación, or call the lost souls” (Cárdenas 1989, 271). For Morin (1998), icaros are melodies sung during the ayahuasca session. Colpron (2004) uses the term to refer to shamanic songs.

However, for Brabec, “ikaros” are only one particular genre of ayahuasca songs. In “Tracing hallucinations,” he does not conceptualize his “ikaro” category beyond the following sentence: “Among the Shipibo, there is one song category that does not sound like other Shipibo songs and which is exclusively used in ayahuasca sessions: ikaro” (2011a, 36). I am sure that Brabec had solid reasons for reconceptualizing the category, but he does not explain the grounds and limits of the new one, and he does not discuss the preexisting (and quite unanimous) terminological interpretation. I suspect that this omission has caused a general misunderstanding of his analysis. In their reviews of Brabec de Mori’s hypothesis, Beyer was thinking of icaro as “the song used in ayahuasca healing rituals” (2012), Callicott as “the songs used in Shipibo ayahuasca ceremonies” (2020, 360), and Samorini as the “music associated with healing and ritual ayahuasca sessions” (2014, 16). I believe that these reviewers, just as happened to me, missed the fact that Brabec de Mori was specifically referring to one particular genre of ayahuasca songs. In his article “The magic of song” (2011b), Brabec explains that there are two other musical genres rooted in the Shipibo-Conibo musical tradition that are also interpreted in ayahuasca ceremonies: mashá and bewá. In fact, Brabec acknowledges the existence of Shipibo-Conibo ayahuascaqueros who in their ayahuasca ceremonies "sing mainly bewá” (2011b, 174). The ayahuasca songs that belong to these two genres would be considered icaros by most researchers and are radically different from the songs performed by other ethnic groups of the Ucayali basin in their ayahuasca sessions.

My point is that it is not the same to demonstrate that the Shipibo-Conibo ayahuasca songs are very similar to the Cocama or mestizo ayahuasca songs (my first understanding) as it is to prove that some of the ayahuasca songs interpreted by some Shipibo-Conibo shamans are similar to the Cocama or mestizo ayahuasca songs. The second is a valuable finding, but it does not necessarily indicate a recent adoption of brew and practice by the Shipibo-Conibo. Let’s simply recall Chaumeil’s reflections about the importance of the foreign source of shamanic knowledge.
I would also like to comment on Brabec’s idea that “the musical structure of *ikaro* is the only song structure compellingly similar between the Río Napo and the Río Urubamba” (2011a, 36). In the light of that similarity, he deduced a recent and common origin of the ayahuasca shamanic complex. To reach that conclusion, he analyzed the songs performed by seven *ayahuasqueros* belonging to five different ethnic groups of the region: one Cocama, two mestizos, two Shipibos, one Yine (another denomination for the Piro), and one Naporuna. I will limit my criticism to the two Shipibo cases that allow him to suggest the recent incorporation of ayahuasca by the Shipibo-Conibo. One of the Shipibo shamans learned under the guidance of a Cocama teacher, so I do not think that this is the best example of a Shipibo-Conibo song, given that, as I have explained earlier, most Shipibo-Conibo shamans have family elders as their main teachers. Regarding the second Shipibo-Conibo performer, Brabec says:

> Structurally, the song does not show the mentioned features very clearly. For example, in phrase A the higher tone only ascends a second, and the two parts are on the same melodic level at B. In spite of these minor variations and a somehow chaotic progression form B to E, the features are present and the song undoubtedly sounds like an *ikaro* when heard. (Brabec de Mori 2011a, 41)

I feel in this description that the Shipibo *ayahuasquero* who is not directly influenced by a Cocama or mestizo tradition sings in a recognizably distinct way. It is an “*ikaro*,” according to Brabec, but it is notably different. My question is: from a musicological point of view, can we discard the possibility that this “*ikaro*”—and others that are present in the Shipibo-Conibo tradition—were introduced into the Shipibo-Conibo repertoire hundreds or even thousands of years ago and have kept some similarity throughout time? Can we discard the possibility that the source is common but not relatively recent?

Brabec would probably say yes, we can discard it because of “the high pace at which the respective groups develop their very different musical traditions” (2011a, 36). However, in endnote 31 of “Tracing hallucinations,” we find the following information:

> the Kakataibo’s *xonkati* shows many similarities with other “incantation type” medical songs, as e.g. reported for the Brazilian *Suyá* by Seeger or by Hill for the Venezuelan Wakuénai. It seems, though this is still premature, that this medical “incantation type” singing is a truly Pan-Amazonian phenomenon. (2011a, 47)

On the one hand, then, there are three different ethnic groups, belonging to different language families and separated by thousands of kilometers and complex historical circumstances, that sing an “‘incantation type’ medical song” with so much similarity between them that it could be a “truly Pan-Amazonian phenomenon.” On the other hand, Brabec builds his hypothesis upon the fundamental principle that similarities between “*ikaros*” of neighboring groups would be evidence of a recent and common origin.

I will close my criticism of his musicological analysis by pointing out a very significant musical difference between the Cocama or the mestizo and the Shipibo-Conibo ayahuasca practice: the use of the *shacapa*, a leaf-rattle of widespread use in the Upper Amazon (Beyer 2009) that is not used by the Shipibo-Conibo. The absence of this element produces a very different musical experience and suggests a frontier between the Shipibo-Conibo and other ayahuasca shamanic complexes that do use it.

**Cases of recent adoption**

It has been documented that three interfluvial Panoan groups of the Ucayali basin have adopted the use of ayahuasca in the twentieth century: Brabec de Mori foregrounded the case of the Uni-Kakataibo and the Iskobakebo (2011a), whereas Glenn Shepard Jr. reported the case of the Yora, which he witnessed personally (2014). In this section, I will not question this recent adoption, but the conclusions that can be drawn from it.
Both Shepard and Brabec explain that these groups retreated deep into the forest before or during the rubber boom, and when they reemerged decades later, they were not using ayahuasca. In their opinion, this would indicate that when they retreated, the rest of the Panoan groups of the region were not drinking ayahuasca either. My disagreement has to do with the assumption that related groups should have identical shamanic practices. Common sense says that it could be, while the ethnographic data says otherwise. Frank (1994) characterized the Uni-Kakataibo society as barely ritual and remarked on the absence of the specialized role of the shaman and of any hallucinogenic or shamanic plants, except for ayahuasca, which was adopted from the Shipibo-Conibo in the 1930s. In “any hallucinogenic or shamanic plants” is included tobacco, which Erikson considers the Panoan shamanic hallucinogen par excellence (1993, 48). My question is: could we assume that Panoan groups such as the Shipibo-Conibo did not use tobacco at the end of the nineteenth century because the Uni-Kakataibo did not use it when they reemerged? Or could we consider the possibility, in the context of the “contrast between drastic atomization and considerable homogeneity of Panoan groups” noted by Erikson (1986, 185), that the Uni-Kakataibo, the Yora, and the Iskobakebo simply had different shamanic practices?

Regarding *Psychotria*

In his article “Will the real shaman please stand up?,” Glenn Shepard Jr. (2014) conflates two different arguments that would support the idea of the recent expansion of ayahuasca shamanism throughout the Ucayali basin. On one hand, there is Gow’s proposition, which we have already analyzed. On the other, Antonio Bianchi (2005) suggested that the use of *Psychotria viridis* in the ayahuasca brew would be closely related to curanderismo ayahuasquero mestizo (as characterized by Gow). I will not detail Bianchi’s theory, but I will point out that, although stimulating, it does not provide evidence that ayahuasca shamanism and/or the ayahuasca brew with *Psychotria* were not present in the Ucayali basin before the rubber boom. With these two hypotheses as references for his argumentation, Shepard reports that the Matsigenka of the Manu incorporated *Psychotria* into their ayahuasca brew in the 1960s, and that only then did they start to practice ayahuasca shamanism (as categorized by Gow), because their traditional healing practices revolved around the use of tobacco. Shepard concludes that this would fit into and reinforce Gow’s model.

Before analyzing his arguments, it is important to note that, according to Shepard, the Matsigenka of the Manu “have a fairly long history of using the ayahuasca vine” (2014, 20). Before the adoption of *Psychotria*, he goes on, they used to prepare an ayahuasca brew with other admixtures; whether those admixtures contained any psychoactive compound—such as DMT—or worked on a symbolic basis, Shepard does not know. However, when he asked the older men about the former brew, “they mention that it, too, is strongly ‘intoxicating’ (kepigari) and takes the shaman to the spirit world as effectively as the contemporary *Psychotria*-based brew” (2014, 21). Shepard explains that both the former and the present brew were drunk in collective shamanic rituals for physical purification and hunting purposes: “The visionary state allows hunters to interact directly with spirits that control access to game animals” (2014, 22). Therefore, the Matsigenka of the Manu have used an ayahuasca brew for shamanic purposes for an undetermined but long length of time. Maybe it was not what Gow considered ayahuasca shamanism, but it was ayahuasca shamanism. Maybe it was not a *Banisteriopsis* and *Psychotria* brew, but it was an ayahuasca brew with admixtures that produced exactly the same effects as the other.

My first doubt has to do with Shepard’s assertion that ayahuasca shamanism (as characterized by Gow) was not present among the Matsigenka before the introduction of *Psychotria* in the 1960s. Shepard informs us that the Matsigenka recognized the existence of “specialized shaman-healers” back then, but their “healing skills were more associated with tobacco” (2014,
31). However, in the 1850s Grandidier observed that among the Campa (an ethnonym that in the past also included the Matsigenka), there were respected doctors who drank *camalampi* with their patients, practiced their healing art by singing, extracting alien objects from the patient’s body, and charging for their work (Grandidier 1861, 143-44).

Regarding the adoption of the *Psychotria* leaves, Shepard explains that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Matsigenka of the Manu split off from the rest of the Matsigenka who dwell in the Upper and Middle Urubamba. Both sections remained uncommunicated until the 1960s, when evangelical missionaries employed Matsigenka guides from the Urubamba to recontact their relatives. That is the moment in which the transmission of the *Psychotria* leaves would have taken place. Shepard’s deduction is as follows: when, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Matsigenka of the Manu split off, there was no *Psychotria* in the ayahuasca brew among the Arawakan groups of the region. *Psychotria* would have come with the mestizo populations at the end of the nineteenth century, during the rubber boom. The Arawakan populations would have adopted it, and, in the 1960s, it would have finally reached the Matsigenka of the Manu. As the *Psychotria* leaves came to them from the Urubamba, they called them *orovampashi*, which Shepard translates as “leaf from the Urubamba” (2014, 20). It makes sense, but the hypothesis relies on some assumptions that I want to point out.

Shepard explains that the Matsigenka of the Manu, after a history of warfare, epidemics, and slavery, retreated to more inaccessible areas, where they stayed isolated until they were recontacted. In this context, can we disregard the possibility that, in that critical moment, they lost part of their shamanic knowledge and/or plant species, and, therefore, the use of the *Psychotria* leaves as an admixture? As Gertrude Dole points out reflecting about the case of the Amahuaca, who were violently pushed away from the Ucayali basin, interfuvial groups “suffered a loss of arts and crafts, customs, knowledge and traditions, as a result of a drastic demographic reduction and relatively frequent migrations” (Dole 1998, 128). Besides, the fact that the former brew of the Matsigenka of the Manu also contained admixtures—Shepard did not rule out DMT—could indicate a search for synergic properties that are at the core of the best-known ayahuasca brew made with the *Psychotria* admixture.

Regarding the terminological evidence, according to Shepard, the Matsigenka of the Urubamba brought the *Psychotria* leaf to their Manu relatives, who started to refer to it as *orovampashi*, “leaf from the Urubamba,” whereas the Matsigenka of the Urubamba called it *chacruna*, “reflecting contact with mestizo and Indigenous peoples further down the Ucayali” (Shepard 2014, 20). However, according to other researchers, among the Asháninka, the word for *Psychotria* is *horova* or *pisitipánaki* (Weiss 1975, 470, 476); among the Ashéninka, it is *jorova* (Hvalkof and Veber 2005, 259); among the Piro, it is *gorowa* (Matteson 1954, 75); and finally, among the Matsigenka, it is either *jorova* (Wise 2011, 152) or *ompíkiri* (Rosengren 2004, 49). I do not know how to interpret the similarity between *jorova/gorowa/horova* and *orovampashi*. I can suggest, though, that neither the Asháninka and Ashéninka of the Ene, Tambo, Gran Pajonal, and Ucayali, nor the Matsigenka and Piro of the Urubamba use the word *jorova/gorowa/horova* meaning that they received the leaf from the Urubamba.

Despite my objections, let’s suppose that ayahuasca shamanism (as characterized by Gow) and the ayahuasca brew with *Psychotria* were adopted in the 1960s by the Matsigenka of the Manu. Could we then deduce that neither the brew nor the shamanic practice were present in the Ucayali basin before the rubber boom? The answer is very simple: there is no evidence whatsoever to support that hypothesis.

**Conclusion**

“My analysis is somewhat speculative and suffers from a lack of hard data to back it up,” acknowledged Gow (1994, 32) in the introduction of his exceptionally influential article “River people.” In the
past thirty years, many authors have adopted Gow’s ideas as the ground for their own elaborations; nevertheless, the lack of hard data remains. In my opinion, Brabec de Mori’s attempt to strengthen Gow’s hypothesis by bringing into the debate what he called “soft data” was not successful.

My data—whether soft or hard—points very clearly in the opposite direction. Is my interpretation questionable? No doubt. We could debate whether those sessions reported in Maynas before 1661 would fit into Gow’s category of ayahuasca shamanism. We could disagree on the nature of the preparation that Father Lucero depicted in 1683 in Xibaro territory. We could refuse to accept that what Marcoy attested among the Campa and Conibo médecins (“doctors”) in the 1840s was the ayahuasca brew. We could even question the accuracy of Tessmann’s observations in the 1920s, when he reported that among the Shipibo ayahuasca “witchcraft” was widespread, whereas among the Cocama it was a new practice.

However, what can we say about the use of ayahuasca among the mestizo populations before or during the rubber boom in the Ucayali basin? Nothing. I have not found even one single observation in the historiographical records that reported, or indirectly suggested, ayahuasca use by the mestizo populations of the region at that time. And that, paradoxically, is one great strength of Gow’s hypothesis: as it does not present evidences, there is no way to refute them.

Let’s go back to the metaphor of the puzzle. If it were about curanderismo ayahuasquero mestizo before and during the rubber boom, we would not have one single piece, and we would need to draw it all by hand, with imagination. But the puzzle is about Indigenous ayahuasca shamanism, and we do have a considerable number of pieces. And as I put them in place and try to fill the blank spaces with a drawing, the following picture emerges.

When the Jesuit missionaries established the Maynas mission, they found public sessions in which professional healers treated health problems of individuals and got paid for their services. The sessions were held at night, there was blowing, sucking, and singing, and if we were transported to those spaces, we would be surprised by their similarity with modern ayahuasca shamanic sessions as characterized by Gow. I consider that ayahuasca was consumed in those very early sessions, prior to 1661, but the first report was published in 1738, although the observation could have been made in the seventeenth century. We do not know what nations practiced this sort of rituals but we may be quite sure that the Shipibo and other Panoan groups knew of them, given their central position in Santiago de la Laguna, capital of the Maynas mission. On the other hand, the historiographical and ethnographic sources suggest a well-established use of ayahuasca in shamanic contexts in the Ucayali basin in the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, Marcoy reported the use of a “narcotic” by the Conibo and Campa médecins (“doctors”); in the case of the Campa, he reported its emetic properties, so it could be kamalampi, the “vomiting medicine,” that is, ayahuasca. There is no doubt, however, that in the late 1850s Granddier attested, also among the Campa, the use by a trained shaman of the hallucinogenic ayahuasca to treat patients, using songs and charging for his work. In 1905, the use of ayahuasca appears integrated in the mythical narratives of the Cashinaua. In the 1920s, Tessmann reported its use, with vernacular terminologies and cultural particularities, among a number of Panoan and Arawakan peoples, whereas the Cocama were just adopting it under the Quechua name of “ayawáska.” In the case of the Panoan peoples, ethnographies of the twentieth century show the complexity and diversity of the terminology and its profound integration in the ontological fundamentals of the culture. In the light of all this evidence, the idea that the Shipibo-Conibo adopted ayahuasca and ayahuasca shamanism in the nineteenth century via mestizo rubber workers or Cocama neighbors seems highly unlikely.

The historicity of this sketch is, of course, up for debate. However, what we do know with a hundred percent certainty is that, if a couple of primitivist ayahuasca tourists and their beloved Shipibo shaman together praise the millenary antiquity of this knowledge, there is no one who can, with solid evidence, prove them wrong.
References


CHANTRE Y HERRERA, José. 1901. Historia de las misiones de la Compañía de Jesús en el Marañón español. Madrid: Imprenta de A. Avrial.


SURLALLÉS, Alexandre. 2007. “Los candoshi”. In Guía etnográfica de la alta Amazonía, Volume VI, edited by Fernando Santos Granero and Frederica Barclay, 247-380. Lima: IFEA.


TOURNON, Jacques. 2002. La merma mágica: vida e historia de los shipibo-conibo del Ucayali. Lima: CAAAP.

TOURNON, Jacques. 2013. De boas, incas y otros seres. Lima: CETA.


