

Ayahuasca ceremonies and music

Music has been an integral part of indigenous practices involving expanded states of consciousness since time immemorial and is currently becoming an essential component of modern psychedelic therapy. In this paper, I will briefly explore its importance and influence while we are under the effect of entheogens.

The word “entheogen” could be translated as “that which causes God to be within an individual” and is used to replace the less accurate word “psychedelic” (meaning “mind manifesting”) to talk about states induced by various substances including master plants such as psilocybe mushrooms or ayahuasca, by synthetic drugs like LSD or by consciousness altering exercises like shamanic drumming or sweat lodges. There is much to be said about all of these techniques, however I will focus mainly on music during ayahuasca ceremonies because there I can rely on my own experience.

Ayahuasca is a DMT containing brew of two amazonian plants, Chacruna and Banisteriopsis caapi, that has been traditionally used in amazonian shamanism and lately spread around the globe. It has entheogenic properties, causing significant expansion of consciousness. The effect of ayahuasca cannot be accurately described by words; it is one of those things that need to be experienced in order to be able to imagine them. Moreover, every journey of every person tends to be unique and no two ceremonies are ever the same. That being said, there are some themes that seem to be occurring more often than others - a journey towards love, the collapsing of boundaries between the self and the other, experiencing the death of the ego and communicating with spirits and deities.



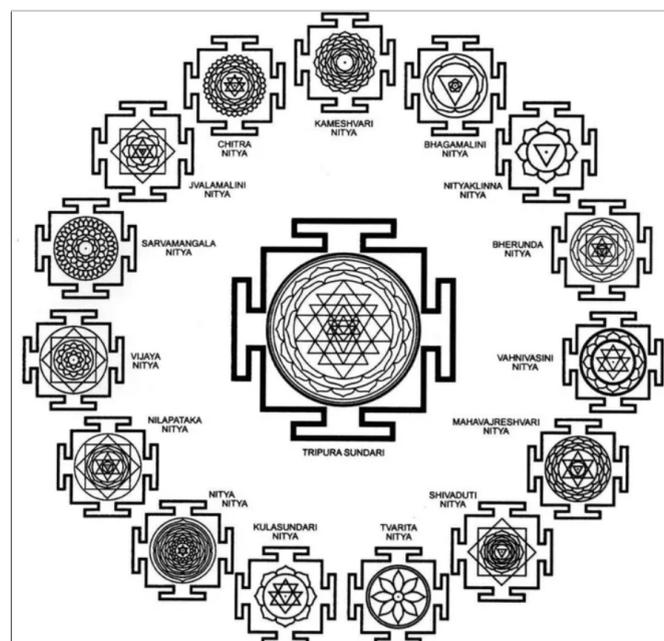
Chacruna leaves with caapi vine



Ayahuasca brew

Going through these experiences is almost always accompanied by music. Ayahuasca ceremonies are traditionally led by experienced shamans who sing songs called “icaros”. Icaros are often sung in native tongues and are songs that the shaman learned directly from communion with plants. In the many years that consist of shamanic training, the shaman to be undergoes a variety of so-called “diets”. These are prolonged periods of time, during which she distances herself from other people, eats a very plain and simple diet - usually boiled rice and boiled fish or plantains - and drinks brew of one of many possible master plants. Master plants are plants that are considered to be teachers and communicate with people who really listen. Part of this communication is teaching us humans their songs - what we call “icaros”. When a shaman sings icaros during the ceremony, she calls upon the spirits of nature to protect the ceremony space, to heal the people in her care, to modulate the visions, to provide spiritual protection or to diagnose the cause of an ailment and divine a treatment.

Some shamans will also use other music than just icaros. Maestro Sanango, who I’ve been working with, is heavily influenced by vedic philosophy and sings many sanskrit mantras in the ceremonies he leads, calling upon archetypal energies. He says (and I directly experienced it myself in one of my ceremonies), that sanskrit is actually a technology of consciousness. What I find very interesting is a certain similarity between yantras (the visual expressions of certain energies and sounds from vedic tradition) and shipibo art (the visual expressions of energies of icaros from an amazonian tribe). It is possible that what these traditions have in common is the ability to see a sound, to see beyond the illusion of matter.



Yantras



Shipibo embroidered art

The music that is played or sung during ceremonies offers a certain guidance for the participants. When everything else falls away, music often remains the only thing one can hold onto. Advice I heard often from Maestro Sanango is to simply become the icaro, become the mantra. When we do that, music can take us on a journey to heavenly realms, and lead us on the path of finding love and compassion. It helps us to leave behind our stories, the idea of limited self and to merge with something greater, to encounter God. It can bring us bliss and joy. Music is already a very powerful healer in itself and these properties are greatly enhanced when in an expanded state of consciousness. It is beyond words to describe the beauty and magic of music in ayahuasca ceremonies. However, not all music will always be enjoyable and can even become extremely unpleasant, causing us to fear. Even though counterintuitive, this dislike is actually a great teacher. Because as the shaman sings, she emits a certain frequency and if it makes us feel uncomfortable, we can be sure that that is where our resistance lies. This provides an invaluable opportunity for the sincere seeker of healing. Much of the inner work done during the ceremonies lies in letting go of resistance to what is. In some cases, the reaction to music can be so strong, that together with ayahuasca it makes us vomit, getting rid of stuck energies, patterns and parasites.

There is a very interesting effect that I observed in ayahuasca music. Once I experience a song in a ceremony, it becomes endowed with a very special spark of beauty that never quite goes away. Listening to it even months or years later can bring back feelings from the ceremony, help connect to our more authentic self and to the Spirit. It helps us to remember. In this way, the music remains a powerful medicine that we can come back to for support in the process of integration.