

## Icaros

Deep in the Upper Amazon Rainforest, there is an ancient tradition that has been preserved for centuries and maybe longer, surviving even through the Spanish conquest of South America. The people of the remaining lineages call themselves Shipibo, which simply means “The People” (more literally, it translates to the monkeys. “Shipi” is a type of monkey and -bo is a plural suffix). As with any native tradition, the Shipibo have deep spiritual connections to the land that they inhabit. Because they live in thick lush jungle, their connections to plants are particularly powerful. Though all of the plants are considered vital to the balance of the ecosystem, some are held up as having special spiritual importance. These are called master plants, and they are considered to be teachers, doctors, and healers.

The traditional shipibo curandera/o (shaman) was a person who learned from and cultivated a relationship with these master plants in order to embody their wisdom, healing, and teachings for all of the people. These relationships are built through a process called dieting, in which the curandero sacrifices worldly pleasures and connections for a designated period of time in order to focus all of his energy and intention on his connection to the spirit of the plant that he is dieting. The plant spirit seeks to live within the curandero and use their physical presence to manifest in the physical world. This requires the person to be completely open and empty, and so the diet is often a process of clearing out stuck energy from the body, letting go of attachment, and opening to make space for the plant. The presence of the plant in the energy body can open the curandero to many powerful intuitive and spiritual abilities, but the one that I want to focus on is the ability to sing “Icaros”, or medicine songs.

At their core, Icaros are songs that carry the spiritual energies and intentions of the plants within their sonic vibration. As compared to average music, the Icaros are extremely intentional and functional. They are more like tools than art, and the beauty comes second to the functional intention of the vibrations. In many traditions, the songs are sung without any instrumental accompaniment that would distract from the primary objective (think about playing the bongos at a surgery). They are considered the energetic equivalent of the western surgeon's scalpel, requiring years of practice and learning to wield properly. In order to sing in this way, one must be very clear and empty, and must have an intimate relationship with the plants they are channeling. Oftentimes, the songs and words will come during the diets in dreams, voices, or just spontaneously while practicing. In fact, it is believed that the entire Shipibo language was gifted to the Shipibo by the jungle and the plants in this way. The language is similar to Sanskrit in

that each word holds a very refined and specific energy within it, and to speak it is to invoke that energy. For this reason, one must be very present and intentional when using the icaros so as to avoid accidentally bringing a disharmonious or malevolent energy into the space. For example, if you are singing and you slip back into your ego mind (perhaps critiquing your singing voice) that low vibration is what you will project into the room.

The words and actions that make up and icaro are largely based around the concept of energetic cleaning and organization (Their healing tradition holds the philosophy that all wounds (physical, emotional, or spiritual) heal on their own if you keep them clean) Although the icaros are free-flowing and can last for several hours or even days, there still are grammatical structures that are very important to the function of the icaro. The melodies consist of “verses” that are repeated over and over without much variation, and a concise intention is packaged into each “verse”. A verse is commonly started by invoking a specific energy, usually by naming a spirit, place, or thing, and by naming the spirit, one becomes that spirit. Each name that the curandero holds in his vocabulary is a vibrational ally, and each one has different capacities. The invocation will then be followed by an action, where the energy is being directed in a specific way. This description of the icaro structure is very rational, but at it’s best, it is completely channeled and the plants take care of these details.

Icaros are often associated with ayahuasca ceremonies, and it is true that this is the most common context for them to be sung, however they are a spiritual technology completely independent of ayahuasca. It is not at all uncommon for icaros to be sung outside of the formal ceremony space (I use the word “formal” to highlight the perspective that **all** of life is a ceremony). Ayahuasca and other consciousness-altering substances and practices simply serve to sensitize one to the world of spirit and energy that is always there, thus making it easier to work in these realms. Ideally, the shaman does not need ayahuasca to do his work; he uses it as an aid as opposed to a crutch.

Icaros are just one awesome outlet for the power of plant spirits, and I have only just dipped my toes in the ocean of possibilities and understandings. As I mentioned earlier, a lot of this is an intellectualization of a phenomenon that is not made to be understood by the mind. When I sing, it is really a practice in opening the heart and giving myself over to a higher power. Not only is it a powerful spiritual tool, but it is also a beautiful artistic medium, a means of prayer and celebration, and it’s a heck of a lot of fun to do once it starts to flow!