

# ICAROS

## MAGICAL SONGS OF THE AMAZON

Francesco Sammarco

*'I am flying through the air,  
I am flying for you,  
I am flying with a happy music,  
with an exciting music'*

Don Mariano  
(Shipibo-Conibo shaman)

There is something moving and inescapable in the similarity between the two words 'Icaro' - the shamanic singing tradition of Peru, and 'Icarus' - the subject of the ancient Greek myth about the man who flew too close to the sun. It is as if there were a connection between Icarus, inebriated by his flight, high in the skies upon his waxed wings, and the magical shamanic songs, which go high into the spirit world. But there the parallel stops.

Icaros (or *Ikaros*) are the magical tunes or lyrics - which may

be sung, whispered or whistled - by shamans (and sorcerers alike) in Peru, to communicate with the spirit world. The word possibly derives from the Quechua verb *Ikaray* - 'to blow smoke' a technique used by shamans in their healing.

Shamans use these melodies to magically charge a person, a plant, or virtually anything else - whether animated or unanimated - with a specific intent or purpose, to obtain or influence a desired outcome. They represent a special language intended to

interact with the spirit world, including - but not limited to - the plant spirit realms.

### THE SHAMANIC DIET

The traditional way by which shamanic healers in the Peruvian Amazon learn - or better still, receive directly from the spirits - their icaros, is through a regimen of diet (*la dieta*). The shaman receives the tunes whilst they are asleep, dreaming, or in vision - whilst journeying in the spirit world intoxicated by ayahuasca, or during the plant diet.

The shamanic diet imposes physical isolation in remote jungle areas (*monte*) away from people, and a strict celibacy and abstinence from certain foods (pork, chilli, spicy food, fats, meat from farmed animals, salt, sugar, most vegetables and fruits) too, as well as an avoidance of alcohol, canned food, and chilled and fizzy drinks. The rigours of the traditional diet in fact only allow for certain river fishes, rice and green plantains (boiled or roasted) to be eaten, all unseasoned.

The contact with the spirit world is therefore achieved thanks to a diet that - in common with other religious, esoteric, shamanic and spiritual traditions - also entails sexual abstinence and isolation.

During the diet the shaman (as well as the apprentice shaman) ritually ingest different *brebajes* (beverages) of *plantas maestros* (teacher plants) and *palos maestros* (teacher trees) in the form of teas, made from the resin, leaves or scraped stem of plants and trees, and, or macerates (from the scraped bark or roots of trees), alternating this with the taking of ayahuasca.

The choice of the plant teachers to diet with, as well as the interaction between the plants and trees of the diet with ayahuasca (which is usually taken on different days to the *brebajes*) will vary from shaman to shaman. This is because many shamans receive their instruction for how to proceed with the diet in vision from the plant spirits themselves.

The diet is therefore the main method used by the shaman for learning, advancing and progressing in their knowledge of the plant spirit world, and receiving powers.

Contrary to what is commonly believed - with the exception of ayahuasca and a few other plants such as one called *toé* - the plants

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of the diet do not usually have an intrinsic psychotropic, mind-altering effect. Visions occur by a synergetic interaction between the diet's setting and the plants of the diet, which are naturally complementary to each other.

This is the framework within which the shaman operates, and it is of paramount importance to be aware of this in order to understand the process of the diet and - consequently - that of the origin of the icaros.

Every plant teacher spirit may bestow, as a gift, an icaro to the person undergoing the shamanic diet, and this icaro becomes the communication link between that plant itself and the shaman. The icaro so received is therefore the magical method with which the shaman may directly communicate with the spirit realm, and it may be used to invoke, summon and ask for help from the plant spirits themselves.

This is why shamans in the Peruvian Amazon, when performing healing on a patient, call upon the spirit of their plant ally first; they do this to summon power, and then ask for the healing to take place. The longer the diet with a large variety of plant teachers, the more icaros a shaman may receive.

Sorcerers (called *brujos*, *maleros*, *shitaneros* or *hechizeros* in Peru) obtain their icaros in similar ways, but unlike shamans use their icaros in a negative fashion: to contact dark forces or evil spirits, to damage people, cause harm (*daño*), bring misfortune, illness or even death.

Icaros may also be passed on from master shaman to their



students, and they can be sung in different native dialects and tongues, as well as in Spanish. They may also be passed on between *maestros* (male shamans), as a gift, during ayahuasca ceremonies.

However, icaros received directly during the shamanic diet and sung in native Indian tongue are believed to be much more effective and powerful than those sung in Spanish and learnt from a teacher. This is perhaps because some of the ancient magic formulae are lost in translation, or perhaps because of an intrinsic power embedded in native, indigenous tongues.

There are some shamans who sing their magical songs in a mixture of different Indian dialects, to make themselves deliberately unintelligible to others (as protection and defense from sorcerers or bad spirits). Don Jose' Coral was one such shaman, a *muraya*, also renowned to enter into trance without the aid of ayahuasca.

#### THE MASTER SHAMANS

There are three levels of high shaman in the Peruvian Amazon, the *banco*, the *sumiruna* and the *muraya*.

A *banco*, is a master shaman who has dominance over the jungle and sky realms, they specialise in diagnosing, healing or divining after they have entered into trance, face-down in their mosquito net.

A *sumiruna* can access and master all of the jungle, sky and water realms.

A *muraya* is a shaman who can access the sub-aquatic realm, having control over the water spirits (*yacurunas*) mermaids and river dolphins). They learn this

from aquatic trees, plants and vines. A *muraya* is also a master of the earth (jungle) realms too.

Among the *murayas*, there are also the *alpa muraya* (*muraya* of the earth) who specialise in mastering the spirits of the earth, the *huayra muraya* (*muraya* of the air), who have mastery over meteorological phenomena such as thunder, wind and rain. These are different to the *alto muraya* (*muraya* of the sky), who are masters of the spirits of the sky - heavenly spirits, dwelling in space, and on other planets and constellations.

To confuse things further, one could also be a *banco muraya*. These are shamans who have knowledge of, and dominance over, water plants and spirits, as well as the spirits of the earth.

#### THE VARIED ROLE OF ICAROS

Icaros serve several different purposes. There are some used specifically for healing or love magic, while others are used in shamanic apprenticeship and initiations (*dieta chamanica*). Some are used



Above: Shaman Don Alfredo with *sacha chuchuhuasi*, a woody vine. Don Alfredo stresses the importance of a strict diet on this vine, which only the most knowledgeable shamans may handle safely

Below: Shaman Don Mariano cuts an ayahuasca vine growing on a *chullachaki caspi* tree

A muraya shaman can access the sub-aquatic realm, having control over the water spirits (yacurunas) mermaids and river dolphins



Above: fresh water Amazon river dolphin

Right: flowers of the toé plant (Brugmansia suaveolens)

specifically at the point of ending the shamanic diet (*icaros por la quebra de dieta*), others for spiritual purification (*icaros de purificacion espiritual*), to cleanse, bless and protect people (*el canto de la arkana por la proteccion*), to close a shamanic treatment (*para finalizar un tratamiento*), and there are even *icaros* to overcome the intoxication caused by ayahuasca (*icaros para superar el senso de mareacion*).

The shamans of the Peruvian Amazon also have a concept which they call the *arkana*. This is an invisible energetic protection - which may be given by stones, crystals, angels, rainbows, plant teachers, spirit allies of animals like the jaguar, the eagle, the condor, or other entities - engaged by the shaman for a variety of purposes, especially during ayahuasca ceremonies.

The *arkana* is used by the shamans themselves, first of all for their own protection, then for the protection of the participants (apprentices and patients) taking part in the ayahuasca ritual, in order for all to be shielded from potentially malevolent attacks from *brujos* (witches), competing shamans, or evil spirits.

The *arkana* - like the *icaros* - is received during the shamanic diet. Each *arkana* is different and each ayahuasca ceremony has its own *arkana*. An *arkana* may be employed therapeutically through the chanting of an *icaro*, and we have been able to record one of these *arkana icaro* during a healing session performed by the Shipibo shaman Don Adriano.

During the healing, Don Adriano sang the *icaros* to protect the patient, and here is the song

translated into English:

*'Now that I have extracted this black spirit from you, I can call for the good spirits to come. I want them to arrive like a whirlpool, I want the good spirits to arrive here as a whirlpool and enter with power inside your body. I want this whirlpool to rise above you, to be strong. I am going to finish with this, but first I want to charge this arkana with more power, so that other people or evil spirits may not take it away from you. I ask the plant spirits to help me, I call the spirits, I call my spirit protector. May nothing enter, May no evil spirit enter this body and may all be cleansed and pure.'*

There are also *icaros* against depression, and *icaros* sung when one is receiving powers (*recibiendo poder*) from the spirit world.

Shamans sometimes sing 'autobiographical *icaros*,' *icaros*

usually softly whispered to the plant medicine, and are used to charge it with positive energy and protection.

All power plants - as well as animals, and unanimated things like mountains or lagoons - are believed to have a spirit (*genio*) or a mother (*madre*) that demands utmost care and respect. This is especially true of the ayahuasca medicine, which has a very proud, indomitable spirit.

Other *icaros* are used to announce an exciting journey in the spirit world, when new plant teachers are discovered during the intoxication with ayahuasca, like this one, by Shipibo shaman Don Leoncio, translated into English, in which he sings:

*'In my anaconda ship... I am journeying with a large ship... This ship is as big as an anaconda. I am going with this ship to the place where I will know many, many plants.'*

Moreover, there are *icaros* to acknowledge and celebrate a successful treatment, in which the



sung by some *maestros* and *maestras* (female shamans) to demonstrate how powerful they are as healers (*medicos*).

Specific *icaros* are also sung over plant brews (*el brebaje*) while they are being prepared by the shaman. The brew could be either ayahuasca or other concoctions prepared with other plant teachers such as *remo caspi* (*aspidosperma excelsum*), *toè* (*brugmansia suaveolens*), or *chullachaki caspi* (*brysonima christianeae*) as part of the shamanic diet.

In this case the *icaros* are

shaman declares '*he logrado*' (I've achieved that), and even *icaros* specific to invoke the spirit of the *icaros* themselves (*el dios de los icaros*). This *icaro* spirit is the spirit of the teacher plants who reward the shamans with their songs.

Shipibo-Conibo shamans (*onanyas*) normally sing two or three similar *icaros* in sequence when they see that their patient is very ill or feeling bad.

They do that because when facing a deep-rooted condition - whether of a physical, emotional,

*Shipibo designs express the compelling need to bring the cosmic, heavenly order down to earth, to bring order into chaos, to re-establish harmony*



mental or spiritual nature - they need more time to enact the healing, and so singing a number of icaros allows them to cleanse their patients a little at a time.

These will be icaros that invoke the healing spirits specifically, and exclusively for a cleansing treatment, and not for any other purpose.

When working on patients, Amazonian shamans in Peru always invoke their spirit allies first: and as soon as they have asked for the spirits' help, they may then begin their treatment.

### THE SHIPIBO ICAROS

The icaros sung by the Shipibo-Conibo shamanic healers are very different from the icaros of shamans belonging to other ethnic



groups, and are especially different from the *mestizo* (mixed race) healers, generally of Spanish-European decent.

Shipibo icaros always bear the distinction of a changing of the voice or vocal pitch, often alternating between a strong, masculine tone and that of a more delicate, high-pitched, feminine-like tone. This is known as the 'dual choir' singing style, and for the Shipibo shamans it is a specific way to communicate with the feminine spirits.

The spirits are not only invoked by singing this way, as, by through this vocal technique they are also able to directly enter the ceremony and communicate with - and via - the Shipibo shaman, by using the shaman's own voice.

This dual choir style is one of the most important elements of distinction between Shipibo icaros on one side and all other icaros on the other.

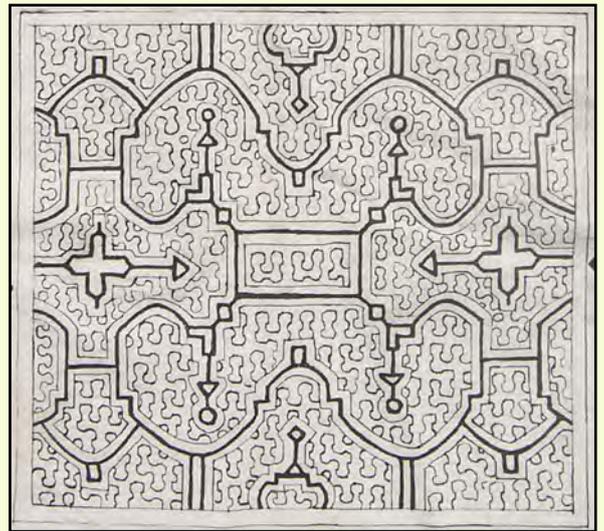
By listening to Shipibo icaros it is clearly evident how the shaman is engaged in an open conversation with their spirit helpers - including the ever present spirit of the ayahuasca vine *Nishi Ibo*.

The shaman lends their voice to the spirits, and as reported by Shipibo shaman Don Leoncio, a feminine spirit teacher may appear or may be summoned during an ayahuasca ceremony, and when this happens he is compelled to sing in the same fashion as this spirit. The shaman has to shape-shift into the spirit whilst it is transmitting its powers.

Don Leoncio maintains that he does not deliberately sing his icaros in this dual choir fashion, and when he does it, he is not following a rational decision; for when the feminine spirits arrive or are summoned, they themselves sing with a very delicate, high-pitched voice, and the shaman needs to become one with them, singing with them in the same fashion to, as he puts it, summon more power.'

Aside from being an 'acoustic bridge' between the spirit world and the village world, it may also be said that the Shipibo shaman is an 'acoustic bridge' between the spirit world and the patient, as well as acting as an 'acoustic bridge' between themselves and feminine and masculine spirit entities operating through them.

Notwithstanding the above however, after a decade of recording icaros performed by many shamans belonging to different traditions and ethnic



lineages in the Peruvian Amazon, and having compiled a large archive of indigenous as well as *mestizo* icaros, I am baffled at the reason why feminine spirits manifest themselves in this fashion only to Shipibo-Conibo shamans (regardless of the gender of the shaman). Why don't they manifest themselves in the same dual choir manner to shamans of other tribal groups, or *mestizo* shamans?

### MELODIES MAGIC AND DESIGNS

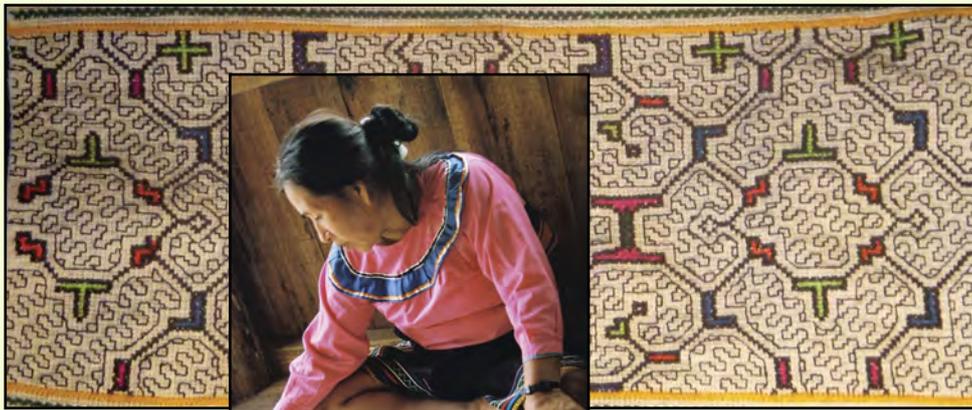
The setting where icaros may be appreciated in their full power and beauty is during the ayahuasca ceremony, when the melodies and tunes engaged by the shaman can literally drive the otherworldly journey of a participant along the precise pathways of a mapped visual - and visionary - landscape.

This is especially true of Shipibo icaros, which may be seen in a visual way through the intricate luminescent designs (*quené*) of the Shipibo people themselves. These designs are reminiscent of phosphenic visions,

Above: Shipibo textile design

Below: two Shipibo shamans hold a ceremony at night





The Shipibo have a long tradition of both embroidered and painted textile design

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El Mundo Magico has recently produced a CD of icaros: 'Shipibo Spirit Songs' (see the review in this issue of Sacred Hoop) which is available from the website: and may be available also from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) [info@elmundo\\_magico.org](mailto:info@elmundo_magico.org)

Below: harvesting medicinal plants



and are deeply embedded with Shipibo cosmogonic and cosmological motifs, and they can be perceived in an acoustic, auditory way by people under the influence of the spirit world or held within the effects of ayahuasca.

Shipibo designs express the compelling need to bring the cosmic, heavenly order down to earth, to bring order into chaos, to re-establish harmony.

To the Shipibo, the entire universe has three cosmic regions - the upper world, which is represented by the great Sky Serpent (the Milky Way) - the world around them where we live in the everyday - and the underworld. For the Shipibo-Conibo these three cosmic regions are made of, and covered by *quené* designs, closely interwoven, constantly emerging, merging and incessantly shifting from the invisible to the visible realms.

Their shamans act as interpreters, and are the focus of the relationship existing between medicine, the

cosmos, *quené* designs and music. Intoxicated and illuminated by ayahuasca, they are capable of accessing the different realms of creation, communicating with spirit beings and navigating through the upper, middle and lower worlds.

During an ayahuasca ritual, tobacco smoke, scented water and perfumes, and visionary *quené* designs (turned into magical lyrics as icaros), are the key tools of the healing method employed synesthetically - in an audio, visual and olfactory sensorial way by the Shipibo shaman, to bring about healing in the patient.

Even without (and independently from) ayahuasca and tobacco smoke, this uniquely intimate relationship between icaros, *quené* designs and shamanism can be seen when we look at the most powerful of the Shipibo-Conibo shaman-mythic beings of olden times, the *Meraya*.

This being was reputedly capable of becoming invisible, of being in two places at once, of shape-shifting into animals and of traveling to other dimensions.

The *Meraya* - as the legend goes - entered into trance inside his mosquito tent for women of the Shipibo tribe, to help them to create designs. In trance, the *Meraya* received a visit from the various spirits, and these are said to have painted their designs onto strips of tree bark, or else to have 'sung' the designs themselves. The *Meraya* then tried to memorise these songs, imitating the spirit melodies in the form of whistles.

As soon as the spirits left the mosquito tent, the *Meraya* attempted to draw these magical songs, bringing them down from the encrypted invisible realm of the spirit melodies, to the visible realm of the designs.

This legend speaks of - or at

least hints at - a relationship existing between the icaros - the magical melodies and the *quené* - the magical designs of the Shipibos. The *Meraya* learnt the melodies and designs (synesthetically perceived as 'seen and heard') he received from the spirit world, and transferred them to the visible, worldly plane.

So, in a way, the icaros served the purpose of codifying the magical *quené* designs, which are said to have - in turn - powerful spirits like the hummingbird (*Pino Heua*), the anaconda (*Ani Ronin*) and the ayahuasca spirit (*Nishi Ibo*) as their masters.

This relationship, of ayahuasca, shamanism, music and visual designs, together with the dual choir vocal technique, remains unique to the Shipibo-Conibo.

A further distinctive mark of Shipibo shamans, is the way they conduct their ayahuasca ceremonies.

These are held almost always without the generally present *shacapa* fan. The *shacapa* is a musical rattle, made from the leaves of certain plants (or, in some cases, bird feathers), which is used almost everywhere else in the Amazon as accompaniment to the singing of icaros, and to clean away negative energies.

Our informant shaman Don Adriano, when asked why the *shacapa* is seldom - if ever - used by the Shipibos during the ayahuasca rituals, maintained that this is because through using a *shacapa*, one would pass on to others the negative energy or illness affecting a patient, and therefore rather than healing, one would effectively be facilitating the opposite effect.

The icaros - whether used for healing, cleansing, protection, love magic or doing harm - have power. They are not just songs, they are magical tunes.

More research is needed if we are going to unravel the mysterious relationship between icaros and the other important aspects of Amazonian shamanism, as all are inextricably linked with the Amazonian shaman, versed in communicating with the spirit world along precise, coded musical pathways - conveyed - in the Shipibo world, in musical designs.

