



## Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon

Stephan V. Beyer. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque. Pp. 544, 12 halftones, 2 charts. \$29.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-0-8263-4370-5.

Reviewed by Amy Eisenberg

Reviewer address: Kakanak Native Hospital, Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation Curyung, Dillingham, Alaska 99576  
dramyeis@yahoo.com

Received: February 9, 2014

Published: March 2, 2014

Volume: 5:151-152

© 2014 Society of Ethnobiology

A wise teaching plant, ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi* (Spruce ex Griseb.) C.V. Morton Malpighiaceae) is the “vine of the soul” documented by Richard Spruce and our beloved mentor and father of ethnobotany, Dr. Richard Evan Schultes, a powerful and ethical advocate for preservation of the Amazonian rainforest. Ayahuasca is a beautiful, alkaloid-rich, psychotropic, woody plant that is used ritually and medicinally by indigenous Amazonian shamans and Mestizo healers in the Upper Amazon.

Author Stephan V. Beyer has a law degree and doctorates in psychology and religion. He studied sacred plant medicine with ayahuascero Don Roberto in the Upper Amazon. *Singing to the Plants* is a very well referenced work with an extensive multidisciplinary bibliography, a number of useful black and white photographs, and Appendices of Plants and Animals Mentioned in the Text. It would have been helpful to include the plant families in these lists of species.

Chapter 1 introduces two remarkable Mestizo healers in the Upper Amazon, Don Roberto Acho Jurama and Doña Maria Luisa Tuesta Flores. Beyer indicates that the purpose of the book is to attempt to understand these shamans and the work that they perform during ayahuasca healing ceremonies. In Chapter 2, the Ayahuasca Ceremony, Beyer describes in great depth all-night-long ayahuasca healing ceremonies. Chapter 3, Shamanic Performance, is intended to communicate the mystery of healing during the ritual. Chapter 4, The Shamanic Landscape, informs us that a shaman is at constant risk of being killed by other more powerful shaman. Chapter 5, Learning the Plants, reveals that with loyalty, it is essential for an individual to ingest a plant to allow it

to teach one from within and to maintain an ongoing dialogue with the plant. To diet with a plant is to take the plant into one's body, devote one's attention to and establish an intimate relationship of mutual love and trust with the plant as one's teacher, doctor and healer. “Learning” the plants is about learning to listen to the plants that speak a language of pure sound. Chapter 6, Sounds, reflects on the words and sounds spoken by plant and animal spirits. Chapter 10, Spirits, conveys that ayahuasca permits the shaman to see spirits in their own form – in the form in which they choose to appear. Chapter 14, Healing, talks of the culturally meaningful visceral theatre of the healing ritual performance. Chapter 18, Plant Medicine, refers to *Maquira coriacea* (H. Karst.) C.C. Berg Moraceae as a “palm” while citing it as an example of the doctrine of signatures because the ends of the fallen branches resemble erect penises and wearing pieces of it is alleged to increase male virility.

Chapter 20, An Introduction to Ayahuasca, describes the term *ayahuasca* (vine of the soul) in the Quechua language and the pharmacology of this ritual plant that is highly significant for almost all indigenous peoples of the Upper Amazon. Chapter 22, Questions in the Study of Ayahuasca, discusses the chemistry of the vine of the soul and cites the experiences of Dr. Richard Evan Schultes who drank an infusion of ayahuasca bark at Puerto Limón. Chapter 25, Other Psychoactive Plants, features tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica* L. Solanaceae) as a most potent, sacred, important, and almost universal shamanic plant in the Upper Amazon possessing the ability to induce hallucinations. Along with other psychoactive alkaloids, *N. rustica* reportedly contains the highest levels of nicotine of any tobacco species.



Chapter 28, Beings of Earth and Water, speaks of a powerful shaman, *Inia geoffrensis*, the pink dolphin, (*bufeo colorado* in Spanish) which is hunted for its body parts. Beyer reported that Mestizos strongly believe that dolphins seek sexual intercourse with *Homo sapiens*. A Mestizo man alleges that when he was thirteen years of age he had sex with a dolphin that jumped into his boat. He heard that dolphins could be more sexually gratifying than women. Further, if a man wears the ear of a dolphin on his wrist he will enjoy large and prolonged erections, and the vulva of a dolphin tied on one's upper arm makes one irresistible to women. Pulverized dolphin body parts may be used to seduce women. Using the penis of a dolphin, a sorcerer can call the spirit of the dolphin to attack women and cause one to have a voracious sexual appetite with every available man. As a consequence of the slaughter of pink dolphins for their body parts, *I. geoffrensis* was previously listed as Vulnerable in the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Red List and was facing a high risk of extinction in the wild. Today the IUCN classifies this remarkable species as Data Deficient due to the limited amount of current information available on threats, ecology, population numbers, and trends. In areas where these creatures have been studied, much of the information summarized in the assessment is dated and may no longer be valid.

Chapter 29, Hispanic Influences, acknowledges that Mestizo shamans inherited the doctrine of signatures from Hispanic culture and it is an underlying premise of much of their plant medicine. There is little evidence of any indigenous Amazonian equivalent with regard to plants. Chapter 31, Ayahuasca Meets Global Modernism, notes that ayahuasca shamanism is up for sale on the global market and has been endorsed by international celebrities. Ayahuasca tourists seeking ayahuasca shamanism exert a profound influence promoted in the New Age marketplace. The vine of the soul, while indigenous to Amazonia, is now enmeshed in and on sale in the international medicinal plants and psychoactive substances market. Chapter 32, Ayahuasca Tourism, states that this form of commercialization has brought new attention, money, and problems to traditional healers and their communities. It has created an international market for the misrepresentation and exploitation of traditional practices.

Chapters 33, Ayahuasca and the Law, and 34, Shamans Fight Back, are important thought-

provoking discussions on the issues concerning indigenous traditional knowledge and intellectual property including the Ayahuasca Patent Case and Amazonian Shamans' Organizations from which arose the Yurayaco Declaration of fourteen points that states:

"Nonindigenous peoples are now acknowledging the importance of our wisdom and the value of our medicinal and sacred plants. Many of them desecrate our culture and our territories, traffic in yage' and other plants, dress like Indians, and act like charlatans. We note with concern that a new form of tourism is being promoted to deceive foreigners with purported services of *taitas* or shamans in several villages in the Amazon foothills" (p. 380).

The Peruvian National Institute of Culture declared ayahuasca a plant species with an extraordinary cultural history and that indigenous ayahuasca rituals are part of the national cultural heritage of Peru and are to be protected in order to ensure their cultural continuity.

In Chapter 35, The Future, Beyer concludes that today there are few Mestizo healers who have apprentices. Without students there is no future. However ayahuascero Don Roberto is hopeful and expressed that, "the medicine will continue" (p. 385). Young people will take up the path when they understand the power it gives them.

The wonderful cover painting by Upper Amazon traditional healer and visionary artist Don Francisco Montes Shuña entitled *El Origen de la Ayahuasca y de la Chacrana* (1998) depicts his ayahuasca visions with natural pigments on sheets of pounded bark. In the painting, Pachamama, Earth Mother, and Sachamama, Great Boa, observe the ayahuasca vine of the soul and the chacruna plant (*Psychotria viridis* Ruiz & Pav Rubiaceae) borne from the body of Aya, a shaman whose name means "death" and "soul."

*Singing to the Plants* is an informative and purposeful contribution to the literature on Mestizo healing and ritual plants within a syncretic Mestizo cultural context. By contrast, one might strongly consider the conservation implications of the commercial buying, selling, trade, and exploitation of sacred indigenous Amazonian traditional endemic plant and animal species by some unprincipled opportunists both local and global, as well as those who flock to the region to seek and experience powerful hallucinogens for New Age/recreational use.