

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ETHNO MEDICINE AND SHAMANIC PRACTICES IN THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON: JOURNEY THROUGH THE IMAGINARIES OF HEALTH, DISEASE, HEALING AND HEALING

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ABSTRACT

The use of sacred plants with high hallucinogenic power characterizes one of the forms identities of the peoples of the Amazon. The imaginaries about disease and death processes are seen as an internal rupture, product of magical agents, generally related to arrows that are sent by enemies and that cause contamination that produces ills or damages in the body. The shaman, turned into a specialist, will be in charge of extracting, taking out or sucking these arrows that cause damage in order to restore balance, the healing of the sick person that is carried out through an elaborate ritual of ingesting a sacred plant that allows him to know the body and above all the spirit of the patient. This article proposes to discuss the importance of healing the body, but above all to heal the sick, both their bodies and their spirits, restoring a lost balance. Through ethnographic stories, we try to analyze the relationship between knowledge, the use of sacred and medicinal plants as the way in which Amazonian groups, despite several years of contact maintain a philosophy of balance between body and spirit, in order to heal, maintain well-being and health.

KEYWORDS: Ethnography, Shamanism, Sacred plants, Knowledge, Ethno-medicine

CONTEXTS: The imaginary of illness and healing among Amazonian groups.

The Amazon jungles were historically considered as spaces of power and healing. As places where healing practices intermingled with the magical and natural, in this ecology, the shamans, converted into true power groups, controlled the forces of nature and managed the knowledge of medicinal plants to heal, the nature-culture relationship configures identity forms that configured the Amazonian being, so this is an important element of ethnographic interpretation (Trujillo, 2001; Taussig, 1987; Harner, 1978; Ferigcla, 1998).

For example, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, the daily use of hallucinogenic plants and the ability to transcend to other spaces of consciousness by yachacs, uwishins, iros or shamans, contributed to building images about the power of this ecology, its nature, its men and women. For the Shuar uwishin, the illness and death continuum is related to an internal rupture, product of magical agents (arrows), which are sent by their enemies through a sorcerer or uwishin, causing ills in the body. These arrows can cause

illness or death, if they are not removed by another uwishin who, through healing rituals, "sucks" the arrows, extracting them from the body of the sick person and cleanses him of evil.

One gets sick because the enemies send magical arrows, they get into the body and start sucking life, the arrows are alive and if they are not removed they kill people (interview, Shuar shaman, 2010)

Among the Amazonian groups, there are two ways of interpreting the causes of illnesses: some are due to the actions of sorcerers (evil, witchcraft, sorcery); and, others refer to the arrivals or brought from the city; especially flu, pneumonia, tuberculosis, diarrhea, infections, tetanus, measles, smallpox, etc.

Illnesses here are different from those in the city, here it is more envy and sorcery, that is what the shaman cures, from there (where you) come those illnesses such as malaria, cancer, flu, tuberculosis, fevers... all that we call

illness from the hospital, from the doctor (interview, August 2008)

SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE, DISEASE, HEALING AND HEALING

Before 1960, most of the illnesses that affected the Amazonian groups were treated using “jungle or forest medicine”. At present, there are few treatments that include only these ways of understanding the health, disease, and treatment process, mainly due to loss of knowledge, symbolic efficiency, and the forest resource (Anda and Trujillo, 2021).

Before, the grandparents only cured the disease based on natem and malicua, the disease was related to witchcraft, falls, and fractures. Everything was treated with remedies from the forest, the death of people was the product of war between families. Our grandparents cured with plants from the mountains... the grandparents did not get sick... since before there were no remedies, they had to use what was in the mountains, people died from wars and witchcraft (Shuaman shaman interview, January 2010)

The main causes of mortality were related to daily actions, accidents or wars, according to Jim Yost (1981), evangelical missionary and anthropologist, in his initial studies on the Waorani group, he found that before contact with the West (1956), the death of its members was related to:

- 44% died from clan assassinations by enemy families
- 12% disease or witchcraft
- 10% killed by cowuri (missionaries, rubber ranchers, Kichwa warriors)
- 12% kidnapped by missionaries
- 8% running away from attacks
- 6% snake bite
- 5% accidents
- 2% old age
- 1% unknown causes

As seen in Yost's ethnographic record, illnesses and deaths were related to wars and a magical process. There are no records of deaths from infectious diseases, as there are now, many deaths were related, according to several testimonies: envy and sorcery caused by enemies.

Before, life in the jungle was good, without diseases without contact from people from outside, we hunted with a long and strong harpoon and the largest animal that is

hunted is the tapir and the fish was one named tarangaro after the fish that bears its name. Torah

Before there were no diseases, we never got sick, there were no diseases, this was virgin forest, people lived far away, there was a lot of hunting, if people died it was because there was a lot of sorcery, a lot of war between all the Shuar, that's how we've been before, just fighting We had all been together, we fought between families, they killed each other between brothers, with the Achuar, the settlers, with everyone. Before, we were strong because we drank natem every day, all the children and the elderly that protected us from any disease.

There is also the recurring idea in the interviews that the grandparents were very strong, powerful and did not get sick. This has three explanatory reasons:

- a. The settlement pattern: Before, people lived far away and were separated from their enemies. The enemies are directly responsible for the disease, to whom the potential ability to send magical arrows is attributed, which is why they lived far away, protected by the forest, in a constant war between relatives and shamans.
- b. The intake of sacred plants (banisteropis caapi:ayahusaca-kichwa; natem-shuar; miipo-waorani): Before, sacred plants were taken a lot, that is why people did not get sick and they were braver. For those interviewed, the strength or power of jungle plants was the best healing therapy, since their energy allowed them to have visions and see enemies or what could happen through dreams in the near future.
- c. Deterioration of the diet: The shamans interviewed recurrently state that one of the main problems of the current disease is related to the change in diet: "because we are malnourished, we are forgetting customs from before, we no longer eat as before, only you eat only chemicals, you catch the disease and immediately go to the doctor, he gives you the pills and you just take it, all of that affects you and makes you weaker"

NOSOLOGY AND ETIOLOGY OF JUNGLE DISEASES

The concepts of health and disease cannot be studied outside the culture of a society, so it is important to interpret it within the symbolic parameters on which they

have been built and elaborated. The perceptions of each culture about the health and disease process are related to noseology, that is, the way of interpreting why diseases occur, and etiology, which is the cause and origin of a disease.

Among the Amazonian groups, the forms of interpretation or nosology of diseases and the approaches to healing are different. The shaman will not treat and even avoid curing illnesses that are considered from outside or from the Western doctor.

In the nosology of diseases, dual classifications are basically differentiated, as follows:

- a. Diseases of the body that are cured with remedies: These diseases are basically related to those that are prevalent within daily epidemiological charts, as follows: acute diarrheal diseases (EDA's), acute respiratory infections (ARI's), parasites and malnutrition. These types of diseases are treated with Western medicine (pills, injections) and care is provided by formal health means (hospital, medical center, basic health post).
- b. Illnesses of the spirit that are cured with sacred plants: Illnesses that are cured through the ingestion of ayahuasca or natem, are related to the presence of magical arrows inside the patient's body (sorceries), they will be cured and treated only by the shaman, uwishin, yachac or iro. The person becomes sad and does not feel courage, loses strength, weakens and can die, they are also called magical diseases: love sickness, weakness, sorcery, magic arrows, envy.

Sorcery is presented as something inexplicable, with strange symptoms: headache, pills are bad, internal colic, cramps, symptoms that seem normal to the formal doctor. The idea of damage and envy are always in the speech of the Shuar, there is a specific nosology for diseases caused by damage, within a kind of causality related to contagious magic, the same that without healing is very dangerous, being able to cause death (Muñoz-Bernard, 1990).

For the Shuar, for example, disease as an invasion of internal spaces by external pathogenic principles has its nosological classification and corresponds to three categories.

1. Wawek: it is related to serious diseases that can cause death and are always linked or attributed to witches or bad uwishin
2. Magic contagion syndrome, nasepra, napu, wainiaku: these are diseases caused by encounters with spirits (iwianch), by the contagion of the disease generated by the encounter with another sick person (jurumakin), by an uncontrollable sexual desire, violations of taboos, etc (usutmarmá). Within this classification are serious diseases of infants and children (napu, wainiaku), diarrhea caused by the magical contagion of objects, the fright of spirits.
3. Sunkur: they refer to minor illnesses, which can be attributed to obvious causes such as traumas, injuries or diseases without a specific etiology. Although it is not very clear in the nosology of the diseases of the Shuar, these types of diseases can be attributed to those considered to be from outside, from the city, contagious diseases such as measles, flu, intestinal parasitism, skin infections, malaria, tuberculosis, cholera,

On the other hand, the noseology of damage is classified under the following forms:

1. Waainchi: refers to the bad thoughts of one person to another, that affects in the form of bad energies.
2. Wairash: they are related to strong jokes, causing damage is linked to fights and wars between neighbors, friends or brothers. It presents as a severe headache or heartache that can kill if left untreated. These diseases are related to the so-called Shuar magic, a kind of contagious magic that is transmitted through thought, it is like a game "you hurt yourself in games". Healing is done only by the person who caused the damage, by blowing and inhaling tobacco, complemented by prayers to the spirits.

THE HEALTH AND HEALING CONTINUUM

Before, the idea of having good health was related to restoring an internal balance within the patient's body; this idea has been signified to more direct and tangible processes, the same ones that refer to a fast, effective cure, and at a low economic cost. This is how the processes of health and healing are currently related to the

benefits provided by the relatively rapid healing offered by formal medicine.

The integral idea of seeing health as a healthy balance between the body and the soul is based on the fact that if the body is sick, the soul is also sick, therefore, both the body and the soul of the sick person must be cured. One of the most important problems is related to the loss of health, it is linked to the forgetfulness of the spirits.

Despite the fact that “traditional uses of healing” are widespread in everyday discourse, these are being displaced every day by Western therapeutics that offer more tangible and effective benefits. The idea of being healthy is directly related to that of not being sick, more exactly, not suffering from discomfort or symptoms. The cure of a disease is directly linked to medicines that favor them effectively and in a short time:

Sometimes we no longer believe in sorcerers and healers, because they can no longer cure today's illnesses, it is not like a pill that one takes and quickly takes away the pain (shaman shuar interview)

A clear example of what has been described above is related to a marked and ascending self-medication of the Amazonian groups, especially with regard to their daily illnesses: flu (penicillin and acetaminophen pills), diarrhea (terramycin). However, there is evidence of the use of traditional therapeutics, especially within the family, which responds to cultural beliefs about the causality of the disease, focused on the care of children and witchcraft, which is very present within the worldview of peoples from all over the world. The Amazon.

With regard to children's diseases caused by magical agents, there are prevention mechanisms against them (eyeballs, fright, bad wind, bad air, wrong doing), which are related to religious magic rituals and the use of amulets. , being useful in the psychosomatic field, but ineffective when diseases are caused by external pathogens, the case of diarrhea clarifies this example.

Currently, the idea of the health-disease-healing process is related to or built on the basis of Western medical discourse. Health is seen from non-preventive curative forms, existing cultural particularities that are resignified in everyday life, two much intertwined discourses are evident, the same ones that cause confusion and doubts in the population

SHAMANISM AND HEALING PROCESSES

Shamanic knowledge for Amazonian groups plays important roles, since they are carriers of oral knowledge and symbolic power, they can cause fear and fear in the populations, because through witchcraft or sorcery they can do good or evil, heal or kill people. Among the Shuar, for example, the term uwishin comes from the terminology uwin which means chonta. There is a linguistic relationship between the meaning of the chonta arrows that are sent by the "uwishin" to their enemies to cause damage and the Kichwa shamanic practices, who call the Shuar shamans chonteros.

The Shuar make a literal distinction between uwishin shamans, healers (tsuákratin) and sorcerer shamans (eawékratin). In practice, however, not only sorcerers but also healers are considered to possess destructive powers. Therefore, the common opinion among non-shamans is that all shamans (uwishin) are sorcerers (eawékratin) (Perruchon, 2002)

Therefore, arrows and spirits sent by shamans are the cause of diseases, the people who are hit, weaken and die, for that the natem and the malicua (*datura sp*) are taken, which are magical plants, of power, prepared in rituals to prevent illnesses or protect oneself from them and that allow one to go from a daily plan to a magical-healing plan.

The children, the old and the young, when they are sick, very weak, are given natem and malicua to drink, they fast for three days, only drink water and eat yucca, after that at night they prepare , it is boiled well until it is ready and it is taken. Children like crazy know how to wallow, jump, pull their hair, but after that they get better, the next day they wake up stronger and clean and the diseases go away and it is more difficult for the disease to strike

Despite the fact that many Shuar, especially teachers and young evangelists, affirm that they do not believe in the uwishin, whom they classify as witches or sorcerers. The presence of these agents is important, the possibility of witchcraft is present in all houses and it is common to hear about these aspects in everyday conversations.

He is being watched by envious relatives because he has five cows and the bad guys want him to always be poor, that is what harms us the most, that is why we cannot be rich, because right away they envy us, they witch us, they send us evil, and one he gets sick, he has to go to the hospital, buy medicines and since he has no money, he

has to sell the cows and once again he is left poor as before (shaman shuar interview, August 2010)

SHAMANIC HEALING METHODS

Shamanic healing and healing processes or strategies have an elaborate ritual. The ingestion of plants of high healing value such as natem, malicua and tobacco, are part of the sacred ritual that help them pass to another stage of consciousness where they communicate with the spirits. The natem is the center of the shamanic ritual, the healing processes around the ingestion of this hallucinogen, it is related to a prolonged fast of the uwishin, to be able to communicate with their allied spirits, therefore, the rituals are nocturnal. The fast covers about 10 hours where it is only allowed to take a small amount of yucca, banana and chicha. Then, between 7 and 8 at night, the concoction is ingested, the same one that is prepared during several hours of cooking.

The ingestion of the hallucinogen allows the shaman-healer to visualize through hallucinations and dreams the possible illnesses of the patient, the location of the magical arrows and the enemy that sent them. The arrows must be "sucked" and removed by the healer to save the patient's life. In the healing ritual, liquid tobacco is used, which is introduced through the nose, in addition to cigarettes and liquor.

To take natem you must help from 12 noon, at night you take the natem and you suck it, when you are very drunk you put tobacco through your nose, there you see the patient if he has magic arrows, if he has he sucks them and it heals, that's how it comes out clearly... it heals where there are arrows, it sucks and it comes out calm.

These types of diseases are called uwishin wawiamu or diseases related to magical practices.

Some are not good people, some people are prepared to do evil... some of us heal people, others kill people, there is a lot of magic, many sorcerers who do evil, that is the custom among the Shuar, that was like a personal defense among the Shuar it is the iwamburu nakti

The main characteristic of this class of diseases is the impossibility of being treated by formal means, applying this treatment is to accelerate the death of the patient.

When they get sick with magic, there is no way to take them to the hospital, or give pills...people die...the pills are like poison...you should never give pills to a sick

person with arrows...he dies...it turns against him. ..does not see that the arrows are live".

The magic arrows are sent by an "uwishin", who is hired by an enemy, he can send the arrows through wasps or insects that have stings.

You catch the insects that sting, you heal them and send them to go to the body, or you do it with a stick, you make an arrow, you blow it and it becomes alive and you send it to the people's body and that's how it enters no more calm.

The continuous fights between Shuar families generated resentments that provoked the desire for illness and death for the rival, all managed from a symbolic plane where witchcraft, gossip and envy is the articulating axis. The shamans become the mediators between the idea of damage or illness and possible healing, thus, the war is transferred to the sorcerers who must demonstrate their powers based on their curative and preventive capacities, against the arrows (sorcery) that the enemies send.

The use and ingestion of natem-ayahuasca is one of the curative-preventive rituals that remains a tradition in Shuar families. The hallucinogen provides them with protection against diseases, enemies, envy and witchcraft, which are the motives for many inexplicable ailments that afflict them. On the other hand, knowledge about natural plants and their use is also present in small power groups such as teachers and community leaders, who try to reinsert this knowledge into the population. Achieving that many families commonly use plants considered magical (natem, malicua and tobacco), as disease prevention strategies and to have power. These plants of high hallucinogenic power, allow the Amazonian shamans to transport themselves to different symbolic planes of everyday life. In addition to healing, they transmit power, so that they do not get sick and live well.

It is interesting to note that there is a high use of these magical plants, with the aim of making children, both young men and women, strong again. The use of hallucinogens has now become a benchmark for Amazonization of indian identity. Ingestion of hallucinogens on a symbolic level is accepted as "something proper and necessary".

The main magical or power plants are:

- a. Malicua (*datura* sp). It is used in various healing treatments, magical (sorceries, envy) and physical (blows, fractures or injuries).

When one breaks or is injured, he takes malice there, the powerful spirit heals him. This plant has a "strong spirit", harvesting and preparation has an elaborate ritual. When picking it up, the healer permanently prays: "heal me, give me strength". The following steps must be followed before preparing it. Cut it in the morning. Fast. Sexual abstinence. The plant must be outside the house so as not to have a bad dream. Take the preparation outside the house in a quiet place. The plant (the spirit) is presented to the healer in the form of a dream and indicates the cures.

- b. Natem (*banisteropi caapi*): plant with a powerful healing spirit, with effective properties to see visions and discover the enemies that do the "damage". As requirements for the preparation you must: Cut the plant without having bad thoughts or gossip in mind. Fast. Take at night so that the spirit appears. Sexual abstinence.
- c. Tobacco: plant with a preventive spirit, it is used in all rituals to protect itself from negative spirits. Its characteristics are: The spirit of the plant helps and protects the soul. He must be picked up by an old woman without having had sexual relations.

CONCLUSIONS

Ethno-medicine and healing practices among Ecuadorian Amazonian groups

Horacio Fabrega (1979), in the 1970s, defined medical anthropology as: "the discipline that makes explicit the factors, mechanisms and processes that play a role or influence the way in which individuals and groups are affected by and respond to "illness" and "disease", and examines these problems with an emphasis on behavior patterns, related to "as the process by which concerning behaviors and biological signs, particularly those originating in Disease, are given a socially recognized meaning. (...) It is a process to socialize Disease and Illness". These distinctions between two dimensions of the disease are complemented by a later concept, "sickness". It proposes to understand these concepts, which would allow us to analyze that people, populations and societies can "experience" the disease in ways that are different from how biomedicine defines them.

After what was proposed by Fabrega, the 1980s became the key stage for the development of Medical Anthropology, which took a profound turn when the Western academy accepted the importance of understanding other cognitive systems as true structures of knowledge. This in the face of the growing dissatisfaction produced by contemporary medicine, the same medicine that for many healed less and less and made more and more sick. David Werner, in his classic book "Where there is no doctor", becomes the classic study to exemplify new trends to understand medicine as a more holistic science, much more linked to socio-cultural constructions. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) warn about the need to integrate the so-called traditional medicines into official health systems in order to improve the quality of services and patients, not only in rural areas but in all spaces of the health systems, since care is improved and the investment of poor sick patients is reduced. According to data from the WHO itself, 80% of the world's population is in a precarious economic situation for access to the bio-medical system, which makes it difficult for them to access Western medicine and especially medicine.

In this Amazonian region of Ecuador, efforts must be resumed to investigate and systematize knowledge about traditional medicine and shamanic healing and sanatorium practices. Despite the efforts that have been made in recent years to promote the application of traditional medicine and its integration with Western medicine, there are few achievements or systematic research that evaluates these practices, their use and their efficiency.

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