



# The role of icaros as therapeutic tools in psycho-emotional healing: A study of musical experiences of traditional Amazonian medicine

Maya Sherwin, UWE Matteo Politi, Scientific Director. Takiwasi Supervisor: Prof. Leslie Bunt

## Background

Traditional systems of medicine are practiced by indigenous groups throughout the Amazon basin, using plants for healing. In Peru, *vegetalismo*, a form of Traditional Amazonian Medicine (TAM), is practiced by mestizo cultures.

**Icaros** are songs sung by a healer (*curandero*) during rituals of TAM.

- ◆ Considered an essential healing tool
- ◆ Simple strophic forms and pentatonic melodies
- ◆ Can be accompanied with a leaf shaker (*chacapa*)
- ◆ Understood to be transmitted or received from plants
- ◆ May be used for specific healing functions



Chacapa.

*Ayahuasca* ('vine of the soul') is a botanical decoction (usually B.Caapi and P.Viridis) central to TAM. Used for healing and divination, it is psychoactive; producing altered states of consciousness (ASC).

## Aims

- ◆ Give a phenomenological description of experiences of icaros
- ◆ Present findings relevant to music therapy (MT)
- ◆ Contribute to knowledge base on culturally diverse uses of music as therapeutic agent
- ◆ Facilitate for further interdisciplinary study

## Results Experiences of icaros: Meta-categories A-D, phenomenological themes 1.1 - 6.3

| A: Psycho-physical and psycho-emotional   | B: Non-ordinary   | C: Cognitive-psychological  | D: Spiritual and religious   |
|---|---|---|--|
| PT (Phenomenological themes) 1.1 -1.5   | PT.2.1-2.5  | PT 3.1, 4.1 - 4.2, 5.1  | PT 6.1 -6.3  |
| <b>A: Psycho-physical and psycho-emotional</b><br><i>'Before the song, maybe I had some sadness here and some anger there. [When] the song appears, these sensations melt [...]</i> (H: 1.1)<br><br><i>'One song which talks about the heart is 'Abrete corazón' [...] it's profound; it means listen to your emotions, open your heart. You're really in your emotions' (W: 1.5)</i> | <b>B: Non-ordinary</b><br><i>'as if the songs were being sent to different places [...] they went downwards or more into the stomach, or more into the heart' (U: 2.1)</i><br><br><i>'each time it was a new song I had an outburst of a new colour [...] not just a single colour, more a kind of [...] colourful theme [off] moving dancing colours' (L: 2.3)</i> | <b>C: Cognitive-psychological</b><br><i>'it's a guide when you get lost [...] you listen to the songs, [...] and they bring you where you need to go, like inside your body, it's very introspective' (S: 3.1)</i><br><br><i>'it's as if the song pushed out the thoughts' (U: 5.1)</i> | <b>D: Spiritual and religious</b><br><i>'like they are coming from another realm... very far away' and 'higher' (L: 6.1)</i><br><br><i>'That song for me is feeling the presence of the holy spirit, it's feeling the presence of Christ' (W: 6.3)</i> |

## Preliminary conclusions

- ◆ Songs guided experiences of the TAM ceremony, serving as an orientating point of focus
- ◆ Healing experiences were highly individualized
- ◆ Participants considered the songs 'essential' to the ceremony
- ◆ Meaning-making around the impact of songs was culturally-situated
- ◆ Qualities of song and singer impacted on experiences
- ◆ Songs were experienced as mediators of therapeutic interaction

## Future directions

- ◆ How do experiences of specific songs relate to medical and psychological history?
- ◆ Could icaros / other aspects of shamanic music be applied in other contexts?
- ◆ Further investigate aspects of experience that have meaning in Amazonian cosmology

## Methodology

- Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, Larkin 2009).
- ◆ Audio recording of TAM ceremony
  - ◆ Semi-structured interviews conducted 36 - 58 hours post-ceremony
  - ◆ Isolation of song-related data
  - ◆ Analysis of 'primary' and interpretive responses

## Participants

- Six healthy adults attending Takiwasi centre for a self-development retreat
- ◆ Recruited post-clinical screening
  - ◆ 5 male, 1 female, aged 30-60
  - ◆ No psychiatric diagnosis



Participants in a ceremony