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 mestiço 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

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

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

Results

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A: Psycho-physical and psycho-emotional</th>
<th>B: Non-ordinary</th>
<th>C: Cognitive-psychological</th>
<th>D: Spiritual and religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PT (Phenomenological themes) 1.1 - 1.5</td>
<td>PT 2.1-2.5</td>
<td>PT 3.1, 4.1 - 4.2, 5.1</td>
<td>PT 6.1 – 6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A: Psycho-physical and psycho-emotional

‘Before the song, maybe I had some sadness here and some anger there. [When] the song appears, these sensations melt’ (H: 1.1)

‘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)

B: Non-ordinary

‘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)

‘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)

C: Cognitive-psychological

‘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)

‘it’s as if the song pushed out the thoughts’ (U: 5.1)

D: Spiritual and religious

‘like they are coming from another realm… very far away’ and ‘higher’ (L: 6.1)

‘That song for me is feeling the presence of the holy spirit, it’s feeling the presence of Christ’ (W: 6.3)

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