

The 'Icaro' or Shamanic Song

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In the Peruvian jungle 'icaro' is the name for the song or melody used by the curanderos (most commonly used term to describe healers) in their rituals.

Lacking a literal translation in Spanish, Quechua, or other regional languages, in practice it has a very deep and important meaning: the shamanic song is a tool that cures, the wisdom and the vehicle for the curandero's personal energy, the symbol of his power.

Using the 'icaro' means 'charging' an object or potion with the power of the shaman, conferring upon it a specific property to be transmitted to the recipient, be it purification, protection, curing, harm or influence over the will-power. This is done by singing the icaro directly over the transmitter object or substance. The object is then given to the subject and ingested in the case of liquids (potions) or smoke blown over him if tobacco is used. The icaro is fundamental to the curandero's work in the Amazon. It embodies the knowledge of the shaman, constituting his curative patrimony, his working tool, and the inheritance of his apprentice. Being the vehicle for his energy, its effectiveness depends largely upon the curandero's preparation through diets, the taking of purges, his daily regimen and assimilation of ancestral knowledge.

A 'maestro' neither transmits 'techniques' nor formal instruction to his apprentice but rather accompanies and guides him to gain that knowledge for which he is preordained. As part of the training he passes on 'his' icaros.

Every shaman is the owner of his icaros, just as he is the owner of his own experience and wisdom, having received them from his 'maestro' or directly from nature. Curanderos commonly state that the things they know, including icaros, they learnt in dreams or visions that they were given by plants. They recount that in those states of consciousness induced by plant teachers ('plantas maestras') they learnt the melodies without effort or reasoning, feeling instead that the melody manifested itself and often in an unknown language. Generally at the moment of curing, it comes to him in the same way.

Neither the words nor the understanding of the text of the icaros are indispensable. What is important is that the curandero feels and shares the spirit of the icaro. If he really identifies with his icaro he will know when, how and with whom to use it. The icaros used by the shamans have very simple words, alluding to certain plants, animals, and local environmental phenomena possessing power or symbolism.

Nowadays, many icaros contain Christian syncretisms and biblical allusions. Most of them are written in Spanish, Quechua or other dialects, according to the backgrounds of the original maestros, though some are only monochord melodies and very repetitive.

How do icaros work? One might say, as with the Matras of the oriental tradition, they act upon certain energy centers through sound vibrations, modulating organic functions and that subconscious knowledge guides the shaman to choose the right icaro for each situation.

Or one might say that the icaro is a pretext for the shaman to transmit his energy. Or that it is the message transmitted in the icaro that cures.

There is no precise answer; it may be reduced to one or all of these. Any explanation in rationalism a phenomenon which transcends the rational and as such would only be valid subject to testimony and personal experience.

My commitment to a process of personal, first-hand exploration has led me to experience various shaman 'techniques' and I would like to testify to the value of the icaro, in spite of my training as a medical surgeon.

It is impossible to practice in this part of Peru without taking account of the rich variety of Ancestral Medicines, since each case and each patient brings new valid information. However, we must modify our culturally based view and learn to see in a new light the relationship between man and the natural world, accepting that despite the lack of a rational explanation for this, each and every person possesses medical abilities. In some this manifest spontaneously and may be developed or 'unblocked' through work on the body: Principally the curandero uses his body and his energy for curing.

My first encounter with the icaro was seeing how the "curiosos"¹ or the grandparents blew "icarado" tobacco smoke or perfume² over the energy centers of nervous or frightened children or those with windpains, with favorable and immediate results. Later I learnt (and experienced) that this also works with adults, producing a sensation of relaxation and reducing symptoms in the autonomic nervous system.

I have also had the opportunity to observe how two mothers with breast feeding babies suffering from miasas (fly-larvae in the tear-glands and in the mucous membranes of the nose, respectively) used a monotonous whistling, similar to that produced by the adult insect to make the larvae emerge through the orifice through which they entered. In both cases it worked.

In the town of Chazulta, well known for its shamans, curandero Reninger Guerra Flores is famous for treating venomous snake bites: he uses icaros to calm the intense pain.

During curing rituals where plant beverages are used, curanderos direct their healing, regulate individual and collective energy, and look after the unity of the group. The icaro helps to metabolize visions, bring out subjective element son various levels and guide us in our self-exploration, when perceived in modified states of consciousness. At the same time, it maintains a link with our present reality. Although there is no precise sequence to these icaros, the shaman knows or intuits which to use and when. The strength of a curandero is shown by his icaros, perceived on the physical level by each member of the group.

It was during a session with Ayahuasca (curative ritual involving the ingestion of a psychoactive potion composed of *Psychotria viridis*, *Banisteriopsis caapi*, and *Brugmansia sp.*) that, under the effects of this brew, I began to understand the internal significance of the icaro. I should point out that despite having a psychoactive effect of increased perceptions and visions, you do not lose touch with reality and memory.

The narration of the visions is important to explain the order and meaning of each icaro that I have received. The content and terms express my personal and cultural background since they manifest and act through me, moving energies and personal blockages and forming part of an evolutionary process which has completely enveloped me. It has not been a linear process. It has taken time and I have had to pass through thematic cycles following the stimulation of each energy center. This has not been influenced solely by Ayahuasca but also by other depurative plants, diets, fasts, plant baths, purges and dream activity.

¹ "Curiosos" is used autochthonously to describe a person familiar with remedies and medicinal plants (literally 'interested' or 'keen').

² Tobacco or perfume over which an icaro has been sung, to endow it with medicinal properties.

The first vision (which repeated itself several times before I realized it was an icaro) was a small green plant-woman who appeared from the bottle containing the potion to guide me on my path of self-discovery by singing and dancing. The melody she was singing was an invocation of the 'mother' of the plants: 'Mother Ayahuasca'. This 'mother' of plants, according to the curanderos, is equivalent to the soul or spirit in human beings.

It has taken me a long time to dare to sing these icaros: I did not feel that they were mine to use. I have experienced a battle between the denial of my rationality and the acceptance for my deeper I. The more I rejected them, the more the icaros manifested themselves through recurring dreams, physical discomfort and tension. Finally, I have accepted these icaros, a gift from the plants and from life.

After various sessions of visualization and activation of energy centers, manifesting physically as tingling or heat, a certain vision began to repeat itself: one of colored geometric designs which represented at once a natural form, a symbolism and the sound of vowels. But the vowels were not five, as in our alphabet, but seven with the inclusion of the letters 's' and 'm'. I understand that each center had a corresponding icaro-key which I would be given.

In two years I have received six icaros at irregular intervals, without premeditation of their contents or order, always unforeseen and without voluntary participation. They have come through visions, dreams and semi dream states produced by diets and rituals with plant teachers.

The second icaro corresponds to the base chakra (meaning energy center in the Hindu tradition) relating to sexuality. It is the letter 's' and is a small red snake of fire which rises, slithering slowly towards the abdomen and sacral area, seen in three dimensionalities, as if the body were transparent. It relates to vital energy, the ascendant force, rising from the earth, rising towards the sun. Meanwhile I am listening to the icaro of the 's', sung by the little plant-woman hissing, gently dragging out the 'sss' and I see the other participants in the session with a red glow at their base. Although the voice comes from within me I do not recognize it as mine.

In ascending order, the second chakra, the intra-umbilical, corresponds to the letter 'm', which I visualize solid, well-grounded, concrete and material. I feel that the sound must come from the belly, cradle of instinct. Of fear, of life and of death.

These two letters may activate the first two centers corresponding to the primary instincts.

Higher up, the column of light which was orange at the second chakra, becomes green and is a tree which spreads out into the chest. I become conscious of my breathing which has a pleasant depth to it. It is the letter 'a', the bucal opening which protects us and permits us to take in air, to grow, to distend the respiratory tree, open the consciousness, memories and the soul.

The energy circulating between these two points (intra and supra-umbilical) forms a luminous arc rotating on the horizontal plane and this is the yellow sunflower-sun which corresponds to the solar plexus. This center activates protective mechanisms and holds within it the capacity for gaining profound self-knowledge, for sadness and for happiness, for emotions, for curing and for the communication, without words, of profound feelings; as profound as the sound of the letter 'u'.

Rising above this point, we reach the letter 'o', line without beginning or end, representation of the fundamental, eternal cycle, the 'Ouroboros'(italics), or heart center. This is the seat of the greatest curative power which is Love, represented by a violent sun, and abode of the intuition. The letter 'o' is a circle bearing all the symbolic significance of its shape.

The letter 'e' corresponds to the chakra of the forehead. It allows us to 'listen', not just to clearly capture sounds but to 'understand' the message from our bodies or surroundings and to profit from it.

Finally we come to the superior chakra related to the letter 'i', standing for Infinite, Immensity, Interior, Illumination. Its corresponding icaro can help us to 'see' inside forms with more intensity and light and above all to discern, to see the importance and to integrate the image with the whole, with a universal vision; to see in another dimension, with other eyes, with more transcendence and to live fully each moment.

I have not yet received all the icaros. I do not know if I will receive the whole series, nor when nor what will come later. Neither do I know what subconscious mechanism could have brought me these nor if they really work. I have to leave the rational framework and admit that these are a series of interesting unknowns without explanation. Deeply buried within each and every one of us is a knowledge of life, hidden away and estranged from our conscious by an excess of external stimuli and the misuse of our bodies. Given the right conditions, this knowledge can come out unexpectedly, illuminating a path which we have never seen before.

'S'

Introduce me into your body
From there I will speak to you
Introduce me into your mind
From there I will enlighten you
Introduce me into your heart
From there I will give you heat.

You will hear my snake's voice
Sneaking into your hearing
You will see my light without seeing it
Through your senses....
And my warmth will follow you
Further than the coldest cold
And I will be part of you
Dust cast into infinity.

My voice will whisper to you
Things you do not think you know
Within you, you will find
The Answer to your being
Eight (8), fecund double circle
Two serpents intertwined,
That talk to you without telling
That tell you without speaking
NOTHING
I am the energy asleep within you,
Awaken me now
I want to ascend, to uncoil now,
To cross the zero (0) now
To close that circle
Where the flower sleeps on the cross.

When the blue reaches your face

And the moon over your head
 I will go to their meeting
 Red snake, from the base
 To fuse myself with the sun...
 And my voice will guide you through
 The water
 With the warmth of love.

Reconsidering the Snake

Lying on the ground, with my whole body in contact with Mother Earth, coiled around myself, feeling my skin...slithering along, feeling the grass, the damp, textures pressing against every little bit of my surface, listening to the distant whispering from the bowels of the Earth, centuries old, voice of the desires of the flesh, long, big, cold, protective and sensitive, stimulating and awakening embryonic sensations, remembering snake-memories from other times and places.

Neither rejection nor abomination, so I was not the accursed and persecuted creature to whom all evils are attributed...curled up in me and in Me, I was recognized and respected...on crowns and thrones, on the arms and at the feet of gods and mortals, in poems and songs, coiled around the staff of Mercury where the winged sun crowned me, solar knowledge known by the moon which lights up and reflects the curative capacity of my power; on the heads of the goddesses, holding up the moon and giving them dark strength...waking in the East, fire red, hissing and angry, feeling like the bearer of the red water of life, ascending the sun of consciousness...creeping slowly and silently, ascending sinuous and feminine, secretly, to sleep in the center of the eternal flower...seeking my mirror-image, split from itself, that will permit the complementary union that can transform me into infinity.

Sure of myself, stable, feeling that I can connect heaven and earth, my strength is from below, the Earth sustains me, but I can rise and look down, through the timeless crystal blue eye, from the dwelling-place of all the serpents of every age, all of them, visible and invisible, terrestrial, marine, winged dragons, all of them, talking to man and man to himself, urging him to give himself up to the sacred, the deepest, to the transcendent and the impersonal.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, my rational defenses subdued, the mirror showed me my snakish nature, neither good nor bad, aggressive but sweet, a present and real vision... my snake nature. And she forces me to look at her, to understand her, to feel her free from mood judgments; there is no good nor bad only nature with both values, with undifferentiated duality of forces, without responsibility but not irresponsible, just existing... sometimes white, sometimes black with surprisingly innocent eyes in such a face, with breathing life and pre-destined.

At once I understand the reason for the terror which the snake excites, the reasons behind the repulsion, the fear, the need to attribute negativity to her and to distance her and differentiate her from us.

I feel that I fear her because she knows things buried deep within me, because the sensations of her skin are mine with no inhibitions, because she is so material that my spirit protests, fearing that it will be impeded from soaring high...And the first one is the most fearful, the marine snake that suddenly rises up from the waters of the unconscious, waters transparent above her body if I do not move her, but dark if she stirs it up to get out, the mythical leviathan that can turn into chaos the apparent calm of my rationality; I fear that it might drag me into its depths, I fear submerging myself and discovering all that my censure has hidden from me.

Primordial snake, asleep for centuries in the fundamental waters of my material body, associated with instincts, primordial fears, my first water-demon...I might not see you but still you are there... I fear you every time the internal wind blows, bringing me your voice...

Snake that must hide away to avoid being attacked on the pretext of being dangerous (the myth of self-defense), that kills the self as I know it not with the venom of its fangs but with the power of its symbolism which reminds us that as much as our rationality and technology advances, there is a natural force, which we can neither anticipate nor dominate that reminds us that the force of life and death is a continuous cycle. It is symbolized by the Ouroboros, the snake biting its own tail, both male and female, active and passive, dying and being re-born with all its esoteric significance, encircling everything and all ages advancing upon itself, forward, with no beginning nor end with the point O, inexistent O in its mouth. And that little snake that sleeps in the base chakra until life awakens it, lineal representation of life and of the healing power of man's energy, as simple in its lineal shape which is at the same time her natural force. I fear you too, because you bring me out of my abstraction to remind me that my body is limited in time by my individuality while you are the persistent indistinguishable line of all the serpents that I have yet to know...because I have felt you fighting to rise up, I have felt your strength unblocking my body with each new advance, without my having decided to do so, without knowing how to do it...because I recognize in you the way I like to open my mouth, imprisoning life, time and knowledge...and because that same mouth can bring an end to all efforts...because, like you, I too would like to be close to the Earth, to feel that my heat is that which she gives me and to emerge from her womb at night to bathe in the moonlight...to see values change in the world, from within my immobile ophidian blue eye, with my physical eyes closed as only animals divest of the rigid-rational wrappings of the brain are able to see: forwards and backwards further than time and distance with ears capable of hearing the voice of the serpent-mother the way Eve heard it, speaking from within oneself without words, directly to the cells, distrusting even the gods...

I have tried to find my serpent-being and awaken her so she can awaken me, to discover her in my body and mind and to feel my body and mind; to learn to hear the voice of the serpent that wants to tell me simple things about when the foot prints of man appeared on Earth, when he used to watch the skies, talk with the gods and with himself, and when he knew how to listen...to accept the serpent within in its entirety, with its good and its bad, to be united with her, with my dark and light phases...to begin to be.

Recently the serpent spoke...she spoke, singing and teaching. She gave me the icaro of the snake and I accepted it, as I accepted my serpent-being...

...I was a giant cobra, stood erect upon a mound of small knotted snakes, all living within me; and I was dancing, stretching and contracting before my eyes, fixed upon theirs, blue and black, the deep pit from which forked blue tongues emerged, tongues that enter our foreheads, speaking to us from within: This is Mariri³ - tongue of the red snake, which is sometimes asleep, sometimes awake, all powerful, all-curing, when guided by healthy and healing hands...

The cobra asked to be invoked through the song and I knew I should do it...While the snake is singing from someplace inside of me I feel ill, in another world, in another life, in a medieval bed. I invoke the help of the Virgin who appears to me as a beautiful and strong woman, dressed in a great low-cut black dress, showing her breasts...she comes to me and grips my right arm strongly, causing me pain and fear...when she releases her grip I see that it has left a shining metallic hoop on my arm, a two-headed snake; it is encrusted in my skin such that I cannot remove it without damaging myself. It is difficult to accept the serpent, more still to live with it but to withdraw from its power is impossible...you have to decide which of the two heads sees the way, the way

³ Phlegm which is materialized shamanic knowledge. It may be transferred by swallowing it.

of light or the way of darkness. I am the Black Virgin, mother and daughter of the serpent. I am wisdom. I am the Black Virgin, not a virgin the way you might think; I am a mother.

Mother nature and mother wisdom in nature, feeding with her breast the snake and nourishing the spirit. The black virgin, serpent elevated above the serpents, with free-will at my feet, but yet a serpent. I am the virgin mother, pi, indispensable feminine compliment to The Word, for the synthesis of alpha and omega, necessary to being together the beginning and the end of knowledge, Earth and Spirit, to the farthest point and further still, to where the mind cannot reach; the element pi needed for the line to lose its rational quadrature and become a circle, conjugation of the four elements, Earth-matter, air-spirit, fire-energy, water consciousness, like the serpent in Ouroboros, beginning-end-without end which is life, God...the wings of the spirit, of the new, rediscovered spirit which will enable the awakening of the flower-serpent-dragon-eagle-unicorn-light-nothingness...

Superimposed on the coiled serpent, so rapidly that the mind cannot control it come the ancient goddesses in surprising metamorphosis, serpent of wisdom asleep in the depths of the universal memory, fundamental archetype transcending diverse cultures in the darkness: matriarchal power of mother Earth repressed by the cult of the matter-phobic immaterial spirit or by empty materialism. A long succession of natural goddesses, evolving with man: the serpent, the Moon, Tanith, Isis, Ishtar, Minewa, Cibeles, Demetria, the Virgin Mary of Christianity, all goddesses related to fertility (including the Virgin Mary whose mission was 'to incarnate Christ'), goddesses mediating between serpent-matter and solar spirit, all bearing different attributes of the serpent. However we must not forget that the serpent is essence, dual archetype, the opposites within ourselves and that she has within her a masculine-feminine sexual aspect associated with the image of Python, Apophis, Tifon, Satan, the Chinese or medieval dragon and the feathered serpent of the Manas and Incas, charged with aggressiveness but at the same time winged, able to elevate themselves.

This being so, why is it that the Christian Virgin has the head of the snake under her foot, while for the ancient goddesses it occupied a place of honor (the crown of Isis, the arms of Ishtar, the breast of Athena).

Is it that spiritual religion must crush the material, the telluric? If the Virgin is the intermediary between man and Heaven, is she not using the serpent for support, accessing ancient and transcendent knowledge through her contact with the serpent's head? This is not the fight between God and the demon, of Good against Bad, it is man fighting against himself, spirit-man against material-man, against his most instinctive tendencies not to accept his material essence.

The serpent is not evil, what is wrong is the mistaken use of its power, its strength, the attempt to be pure spirit without cleansing the physical part, forgetting the serpent-body, wishing to acquire its knowledge while obviating the ritual, the sacred essence, the respect deserved by such fundamental and ancient knowledge...Only overcoming this can the true spirit shine and the serpent have wings to ascend to the sun, serpent-dragon of the age of alchemy and of the East, relegated to the shadows since the Enlightenment when true light was replaced by false and cold suns.

Now I am one of several little snakes. I warm my body in the sun, enjoying the warmth and smell of the earth until a shadow eclipses the sun; my sisters flee, terrified, hiding under the stones. I fear the approaching bird too but my curiosity to see it close up is stronger than my fear. I know it has seen me and, paralyzed with anxious fear, I wait for it, eyes closed.

The sensation of my body suspended in the air with the wind all around, the feeling of flight makes the fear and risk worthwhile. I see the Earth from where no snake has ever seen it...but...but

I'm no longer a snake! In full flight I see that now I am a dragon embryo in an opulent egg reverberating with the light of the sun which is getting closer all the time. My terrestrial memory is left far behind me and I am filled by a feeling of complete freedom. Light, peace and beauty are all I see below in the solar field of sunflowers, no desires now except, of course, not to fall...I return to my bodily form once again and hear the gentle song of the wind interrupted by a growing noise: the sunflowers are being pulled out by the roots, moved by turbulent waters from which emerges the phallic head of a stone serpent. Terrified, I assume a fetal position. I feel the great strength of this timeless petrified serpent which awakens from its slumber in the depths of the earth, the depths of my subconscious, awakening fears, eliminating the little suns and standing erect before the sun-spirit as if to show that, though it may remain submerged, it can emerge at any moment and that its position is not in opposition to the sun but with it. On top of the snakes a cactus flowers and calm return to the scene. This little dragon knows how to fly now and can follow the eagle's flight.

Now is the time to assume the serpent's choice, to be the winged serpent, to return to our human essence and to accept the duality of the serpent, to confront our serpent aspect and to use this to heal ourselves so that we can heal others. In this process, this polarized flight between instinct and reason, the serpent is there on both sides; we just need to learn to see it and to make the heart, home of the spirit, the meeting place for the two sides, home.

Let us not forget that Medusa's snake-crowned head turned to stone when she saw herself in the mirror: reason cannot accept the instinctive and irrational as a part of itself without unification in the true spirit, composed of the three-dimensional unification of the Whole, which goes beyond Aristotelean thought, restructuring the being instead of pitting it against itself, giving it instead transcendence and space in the cosmos.

It has now been more than five years since the night of the Ayahuasca session in which I had my first contact with the snake asleep within me. During this time, through dreams, visions (during Ayahuasca sessions), music therapy, diets with other plant teachers and physical perception in states of wastefulness I have deepened my understanding of the symbolism of the serpent. The path of self-discovery, the unending path, is unpleasant at times, surprising at others, but always exciting.

I feel that this is an evolution in which we make contact with the deepest contents of our subconscious and that this is not just interesting, picturesque or esoteric but that it is a way to access real, coherent and healing knowledge once we consciously recognize as our own all the aspects of our deeper being. It is precisely this, the discovery of our dark sides, hidden by rational censure which enables us to accept ourselves in our true dimension and to work on ourselves to purify or potential our energy body and to use it to its full.