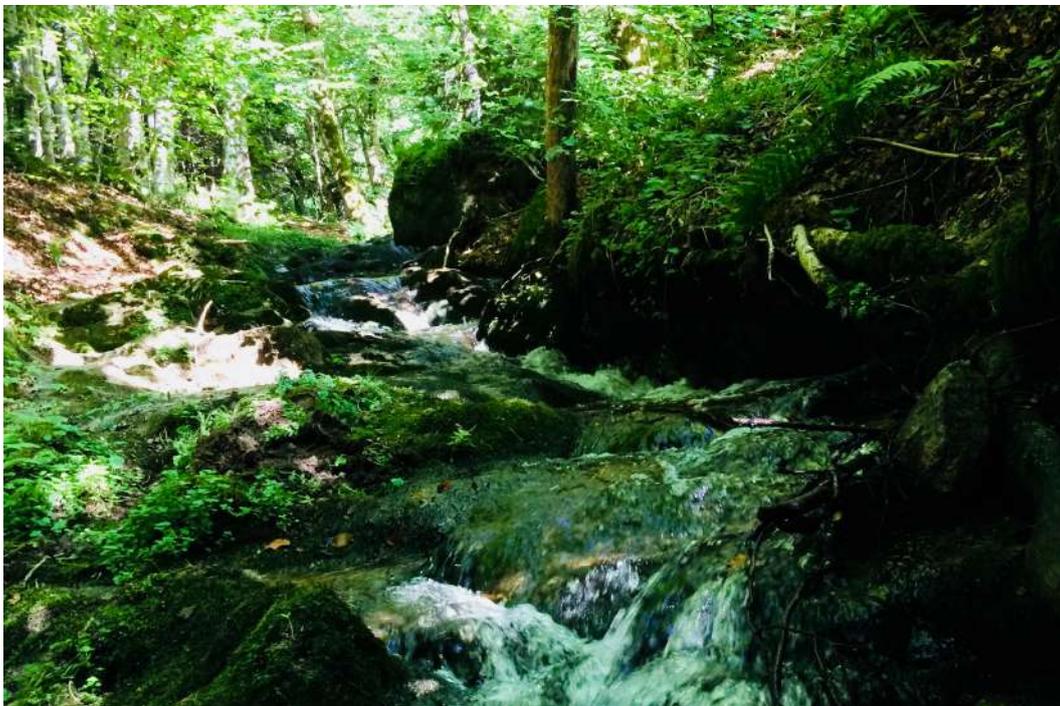


Exploring the Use of Amazonian Plant Diets in Europe



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Abstract

In the Peruvian amazon, among both *mestizo* and various indigenous groups, medicinal plants are often employed by apprenticing *curanderos* or shamans in the practice of *dieta* or diet (Jauregui et al 2011; Jernigan 2011; Sanz-Biset and Cannigueral 2011). This practice involves the ingestion of high concentrations of medicinal plants in social seclusion, whilst abiding to dietary and sexual restrictions (Jauregui et al 2011). These conditions are said to favour contact to the *madre*, or spirit of the plant and learn medicinal knowledge directly from it (Beyer 2009). Diet is also used as a healing technique by lay people, usually under the supervision of a shaman (Beyer 2009). Within a context of internationalisation of Peruvian shamanism (Labate 2014), European individuals who apprenticed as shamans in Peru are making use of Diet in their country of origin both to learn and heal with plants of the European flora. This research will focus on exploring the way diets are conducted in a European context. It will investigate how plants are understood to participate in the healing narratives of individuals and what relations are being constructed to plants. Data will be collected by interviewing these shamans' and their patients on their experiences with dieting as well as on my personal participation in a birch diet. Anthropological literature on neo-paganism and neo-shamanism as well as a multi-species approach will be drawn upon to argue that dieting plants may participate in redefining of relation of individuals to the environment.

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This thesis is dedicated to Matteo Politi, who has taken me into the world of plants, stood beside me at every step and stumble and shared with me with infinite generosity his resources, knowledge and passion

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Introduction

This dissertation is centred on the Amazonian shamanic practice of *dietas de plantas* or plant diets and how it is being used in European contexts. Ethnobotanical and anthropological literature of the Amazonian River Basin reveals the widespread idea that certain plants are considered masters or teachers (Cárdenas-Timoteo 1989) (Guallart, 1989), meaning they are the ones who impart knowledge on how to use plants for healing (Jauregui et al 2011). The practice of plant diets is a technique which allows the apprentice shaman to have contact with the *madre* or spirit of the plant and receive knowledge from it. Plant diets have been reported among a number of indigenous and mestizo groups in Peru (Jauregui et al 2011, Luna 1984, Beyer 2009) and consist in ingesting one plant at a time, for weeks or months in seclusion, following strict behavioural and dietary rules. These conditions are thought to expose the apprentice to the heightened effects of the plant, experience, thus learn its properties and facilitate a spiritual connection to it. A shaman's healing abilities and power are therefore strictly linked to the amount of time he or she spent *dietando plantas*, or dieting plants (meaning ingesting plants under these conditions) (Luna 1984 and 1986) (Beyer 2009). Shamans make use of their experience and knowledge of the plant, as well as their relation to its spirit, to guide lay individuals in plant based healing, where the latter can benefit from greater efficacy and from the spiritual healing of the plant (Sanz-Biset and Cannigueral 2011).

This research specifically focuses on European individuals who, following the discovery of this particular form of shamanism, decide to apprentice according to this method. Subsequently, some export this practice back to their home countries where they employ it with plants of the European flora. They begin dieting to experiment the properties and effects of plants, learn from their spirits to subsequently translate this knowledge in the supervision of the plant diets of their patients. This research can be contextualised within the current international popularity of Peruvian shamanism and of ayahuasca¹ in particular (Labate 2014). Presently, Peruvian shamans may be increasingly exposed to an international public, might be travelling globally to lead plant based healing and apprenticing western individuals to become shamans (Labate 2014). Within this multidirectional phenomenon where subjects, plants and knowledge travel through international networks, anthropological studies have given particular attention to how Peruvian shamanism is being influenced by tourist circuits of plant use and western consumers (Labate 2014). Within these contexts of meaning exchange, it becomes difficult to draw a line between traditional and western elements, whereas it becomes more relevant to understand what these practices reveal of the cultural meaning systems of their new consumers (Fotiou 2016). One important observation that has been put forward by Labate (2014) for example is that ayahuasca rituals acquired the traits of a therapeutic activity through which western individuals acquire reflexivity and self-knowledge, inherent to the construction of the modern self.

¹ Ayahuasca is a psychoactive brew, based on the mixture of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis* plants (Apud and Romani 2017). It is traditionally employed by both indigenous and mestizo groups in the Amazon for diagnostic and healing purposes among many other functions including training shamans, contact protective spirits, future seeing and hunting (Dobkin de Rios 1972). Since the 1970s it has fuelled shamanic tourism, whereby Western tourists participate in the psychedelic experience and have lead to its commodification and proliferation outside of the Amazon (Homan 2016).

This research positions itself within the context of western transformations of Peruvian shamanism. This provides a means to explore how the idea of being healed and taught by the plant, central to the Peruvian tradition, is being constructed and experienced by western subjects who diet European plants. I will pose attention on plant dieting through narratives of experience as well as on discourses regarding its function and use. In light of this context, I seek to explore how plants are configured within the experience of dieting of both shamans and their patients. How may plants participate in the healing narratives of a modern self, and what do these experiences reveal of the way subjects come to understand and relate to plants? Secondly, I want investigate the role dietary rules play in mediating the relation to plants and the environment and what this reveals of broader values and attitudes towards nature. Furthermore, I will engage with the experiences of patients through a multi-species framework which recognises the agency ascribed to plants by people who diet. The significance of this research principally consists in providing an account of how dieting is being utilised in Europe, given that in my knowledge, this particular topic has never been studied academically. It contributes to the literature on western uses of Peruvian Shamanism by shedding light on how the experience of dieting plants may be produced in dialogue with western frameworks and contribute to the way subjects reconfigure their relation to themselves, to plants and to the broader environment.

Literature Review

Diet in Peruvian shamanism

The following sections aim at detailing the use of diet in the apprenticeship of shamans in Peru. They clarify the way this practice was embedded in indigenous cosmologies and daily life and has subsequently been subject to transformations due to colonialism and more recently due to the internationalisation of shamanism. *Dieta* or diet, is a practice which is utilised in both mestizo and indigenous Peru in the apprenticing of shamans and for healing purposes. A number of teacher plants utilised in the initiation of shamans are psychoactive but not all of them (Jauregui et al 2011). Plants produced through the bark of trees, for example, are not visionary and are said to teach through dreams (Freedman 2012). Foods which are allowed consist mainly of cooked plantains, rice and manioc, whereas alcohol, salt, sugar, fats and fruit must be avoided (Luna 1986). The reasons behind these food restrictions are diverse: some foods such are said to inactivate the effect of the plant, others are know to conflict or interact negatively with the plant and cause illness (Jauregui 2011). The initiate must remain secluded in nature and engage in no form of sexual activity. Plants are said to dislike the smell of sex and semen, thus contact might be difficult or the plant may be angered resulting in negative effects (Beyer 2009) (Jauregui et al 2011).

Apprenticing through diets involves learning from plants in a number of ways. By ingesting a certain plant the apprentice is absorbing its physical qualities. For example, if it is a tall strong tree which is able to withstand harsh wind and rain, the shaman will acquire similar resistance to weather conditions (Luna 1984). Furthermore, dieting might also imply that the apprentice observes the ecological relations of the plant,

gaining empirical knowledge of it. (Freedman 2012). Dieting also provides a form of experiential knowledge whereby it is possible to perceive the heightened properties and effects of the plant (Freeman 2012). Plants are known to be teachers as they may appear or whisper knowledge to the apprentice, for example revealing its own healing utility or how it must be prepared. Also very importantly, they impart knowledge in the form of *icaros* (Luna 1984.). These are known as songs handed down by plant spirits and function as tools the shaman may adopt to invoke spirits (Luna 1984). In fact they may be defined as a condensation of the healing effect of a plant (Luna 1984) or as “incantations which unlock” (Freeman 2012: 170) their therapeutic power (Freeman 2012). They may also be used in other forms of interaction with the cosmos, for example to call animals closer for hunting. *Icaros* are testament to the amount of diets a shaman has undergone as well as to the knowledge and power he or she holds (Luna 1984). To this day, shamans continue retreating in nature, ingesting new plants and experimenting their effects to discover cures to new illnesses such as diabetes (Jauregui et al 2011).

Diets in Peru are not only tools of apprenticeship but also used as healing methods (Jauregui et al 2011). In a number of regions in the Peruvian Amazon plant ingestion for healing purposes is accompanied by diets (Sanz-Biset and Cañigueral 2011). This may last from a few days to one year (Jauregui et al 2011). Diets, in this case are based on the idea that restrictions render the plant more efficacious (Sanz-Biset and Cañigueral 2011). During longer lasting diets, even patients may hear or see the spirit of the plant (Sanz-Biset and Cañigueral 2011) or be taught *icaros*, thus familiarise with the spirit of the plant that healed them (Freedman 2012).

The transformations in the uses and meanings of diet

Gearin and Labate (2018) trace some of the ways shamanism in Peru has been transformed throughout 500 years of colonial interventions. The extraction of rubber was central in creating urban settlements and conditions of hardship. This has led the mestizo population to make use of, diffuse and transform indigenous plant knowledge which developed in what is now known as the healing practice of *vegetalismo* (Freedman 2014) (Gow 1994). This led to an inevitable transformation in the meaning of diet. Luna (1986) has argued that a number of food prohibitions used in mestizo practices cannot be explained by practitioners as these have an indigenous origin which has been forgotten due to colonialism and the resulting urbanisation by which people were separated from their food production and forest environments. In *vegetalismo* uses of diet, restrictions are therefore not inherent to a daily life production of personhood as they are in indigenous cosmologies (Gearin and Labate 2018).

On the other hand, in traditional Amazonian indigenous cosmologies, plants may be recognised as non human persons in that they are capable of complex forms of awareness, sensory perception, interaction with other beings including humans and are able to kill or heal (Daly 2015). Personhood is known to be achieved daily through the “continuous process of “other becoming”” (Rival 2012: 130) with other beings of the cosmos (Rival 2012). Food restrictions and daily practices may be inherent to the regulation of individuals’ permeability to the metaphysical and “intimately linked to the human-environment nexus and corresponding ontological configurations of personhood.” (Gearin and Labate 2018: 178). Therefore, not

conforming to certain rules may expose humans to the risk of becoming non-humans (Gearin and Laabte 2018). Similarly, the significance of sexual abstinence in diet also stems from an intimate link to the production of personhood and mediation with visible and invisible beings of the cosmos. (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997). Shamans may contribute to regulating individuals' process of personhood acquisition by guiding them in dietary and behavioural rules (Dolmatoff 1977).

Gearin and Labate (2018) trace this process of transformation all the way to our present day by considering how diet is shaped within a context of western consumption, providing a central point of reflection to my study. They mainly focus on the use of diet in relation to the ingestion of ayahuasca and do not address it within the context of other medicinal plants. Nonetheless, the authors bring to light how dietary restrictions are being justified in ways which reflect the concerns and needs of a western public. For example, diet is said to ensure depth of insights, to benefit experience, to maintain a psychological and energetic purity and to help focus intentions (Gearin and Labate 2018). Maintaining these restrictions for some days following the ayahuasca ritual is framed as a form of integration and an "attempt to harvest the spiritual and healing fruits generated by the food restrictions and behavioural regimes of the diet and the ayahuasca experience itself" (Gearin and Labate 2018:192). This allows a time in which people can reflect on the insights they gained, reconnect to their intentions and allow for them to translate in life decisions and changes in one's relationships (Gearin and Labate 2018). The authors point at how dietary restrictions have very little to do with the meaning they had in indigenous contexts, where food practices were directly linked to establishing and negotiating relations with the beings of the cosmos and the production of personhood. In stead, the process of diet in tourist or international ayahuasca context is primarily one of individual and psychological nature, in which personal intention and the exploration of one's consciousness to gain self knowledge are given a central role (Gearin and Labate 2018).

Western attractions to shamanism

In order to contextualise the practice of diet in Europe, it is also important to review some of the considerations scholars have made in regards to the western attractions to shamanism. Shamanism emerges among the revival of many other spiritual traditions and therapeutic practice, and is often imbued with ideas of personal development and psychology (Labate 2014). These speak of a capitalist culture based on individualism and fixation with the self in which shamanism is one of the many options available for consumers' wellbeing (Johnson 1995) rather than represent an actual interest in indigenous issues. Labate (2014) points out that shamans are often conflated to the role of psychiatrist in responding to the modern subject's self reflexive disposition and search for identity, leading to a cross-contagion between spiritual and psychological explanations of experience. Labate (2014) sheds light on how in ayahuasca rituals, experiences that might have previously understood as having spiritual explanations, may now be considered psychological blockages and traumas. This falls in line with considerations which have been made by Rodd (2018) and Gearin (2015) on the use of ayahuasca in Australian contexts. They too point out that ayahuasca may serve the modern subject's need for self knowledge and autonomy, resulting in an inward connection to the self rather than to other people and the cosmos (Rodd 2018).

A number of scholars have identified other factors driving the attraction towards shamanism. For example, the romanticisation of the indigenous as holding a harmonious relationship to nature and the disillusionment with the christian religion (Fotiou 2016) and with the modern medical system (Apud and Romani 2017). Von Stuckard (2002) has explored how the trend towards neo-shamanism has been driven by an urge to contrast modernity's desacralisation of nature and human detachment from it. This theme may also be found in the neo-pagan movement, which is aimed at joining the spiritual and material worlds and focusing on our complex connection and embeddedness in the cosmos (Morgain 2013). Morgain (2010) studied a neo-pagan community in San Francisco and argues that rituals may be aimed at personal transformations, which recraft and reconfigure the self as more relational and interconnected with the broader cosmos. They thus encourage ways of perceiving the world which challenge the desacralisation of modernity and the mechanisation of science and capitalism (Morgain 2013). These different motives will be important in the analysis of the fieldwork data to identify the role diet and plants might play in the context of study.

Multispecies approaches

Dev (2018) exposes the ontological and epistemic assumptions of ayahuasca research in considering how colonialism has relied on Eurocentric knowledge systems which turned nature into an object of study through a scientific stance and discredited indigenous knowledges by refuting the idea of intelligence in the natural world. This contributed to what Latour (2012) terms the "great divide" whereby culture and nonhuman nature became separate. Dev (2018) argues that recognising subjectivity in plants such as ayahuasca and including Indigenous perspectives is necessary to decolonize academic knowledge production.

It is therefore important to review some of the concepts of multi-species literature to ground this research as a form of human-plant interaction which recognises the agency of plants within the experience of plant teachers (Dev 2018). "Multispecies ethnography has become a mode of attunement to the power of nonhuman subjects to shape the world and to the ways in which the human becomes through relations with other beings". (Ogden et al 2013: 16). It urges us to embark in a post-human endeavour to destabilise Eurocentric worldviews, decentre the human and challenge ideas of its boundedness and fixity (Ogden et al 2013). This translates in an interest by ethnographers to study zones of contact between human and nonhuman others (Haraway 2003) where the separation between nature and culture become problematic (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Ingold (2006) also proposes a "relational constitution of being" (Ingold 2006: 130) with the environment, claiming that beings are actually entanglements of relations and questioning the assumption that the world is understood through symbolic meaning. In stead we should understand the environment beings as something to perceive the world with, to which we are joined in material flows and with which we share the process of formation (Ingold 2006).

Multi-species approaches offer valuable lens into looking at at Amazonian medicine. Attala proposes the Edibility Approach (EA) to understand the ingesting of plants such as ayahuasca as an eco-entanglement where digestion is a relational event through which plants influence people (2017). She grounds her views within the multi-species approaches of Kirksey and Helmreich (2010) and the new materialities turn (Bennett 2010), which encourage interdisciplinary views on materials as lively study subjects through which beings

participate as agents in relations of becoming. Attala (2017) pushes us to look at digestion of plants as a becoming-with process, in which both the eater and the eaten are materially engaged with each other. She applies this lens to the plant tradition of Peru, to recognise that the knowledge imparted by plants is being generated corporeally. According to this tradition, teacher plants need to be consumed by humans for the latter to become more plant-like and thus be able to communicate with the plants (Attala 2017). Thus, “Using the EA, the ingestion of plants transforms from rudimentary survival mechanism to fleshy chemical interface and the device and locus through which not only can plants further communicate with those who eat them, but also becomes a place where the boundaries of beingness and influence blur” (Attala 2017: 13).

With the objective of placing diet within a multi-species framework, it is important to engage with the literature on plant intelligence (Callicott 2013). A number of scholars has point out that ideas of plants as passive beings lacking intention does not capture their abilities for relationships (Abram 1997; Baluska and Mancuso 2009). Plants communicate in their own forms of language, and because they depend on other beings to reproduce their communication is highly interspecies (Dev 2018). These studies demonstrate the influence of plants over different subjects, and challenge the idea that plants are “diametrically opposed and hierarchically inferior to the taxonomic category “animal”” (Attala 2017: 2), leading us to take into consideration human-plant communication. An important attempt is made by Callicott (2013) in bringing together plant intelligence studies with Amazonian diet. She argues that the diet’s food regime and isolation is a way of exposing oneself perceptively, thus favouring one’s entrance in a “phytosemiotic process” (Callicott 2013: 39) in which the plant’s “non-linguistic, phytochemical cues” (Callicott 2013: 40) take the form of auditory and visual hallucinations. These, according to Callicott, are then interpreted culturally as an *icaros*. Callicott’s and Attala’s view provide us with useful hypothesis to frame the interaction with plant teachers in ways which recognises plant agency and the possibility of human-plant communication (Callicott 2013).

Dissertation outline

The common thread bringing the three chapters together is to demonstrate plant dieting does not only serve the therapeutic role of acquiring self knowledge. In stead, it reveals three different ways in which diets lead subjects to recognise plants as intentional entities with which they are interconnected with. Chapter one will be centred on the life of shaman Ghislaine Bourgogne. It will present the way she talks about plants and how they participate in her life history narrative. The aim in this chapter is to engage with the idea of plant dieting as a therapeutic practice which allows Ghislaine to acquire self knowledge and develop her potential. Yet, it demonstrates that it is also part of developing a more relational self, aware of its interconnection to plants and the wider cosmos. In chapter two, I will focus on a second shaman, Celine Cholewka. I will report how Celine began dieting varieties of her local flora and discuss her understandings of plants and dieting. By referring to literature on western neo-shamanism, I will argue that for Celine, plant dieting represents a form of healing which goes beyond an interest in self knowledge, but is understood as a tool for engaging in a connection with the natural world and with the spirits of her land. Chapter three will

address the experiences of patients who dieted plants in different European settings, focusing on the way plants are talked about and how the encounter with the plant is conceived of. It will be shown that patients as well, rely on a recognition of plants as intentional and spirited entities. By referring to multi-species approaches in the field of Peruvian shamanism, I will argue that these encounters with plants may very well depend on a material interaction with the plant world which is promoted through the diet and should not only be addressed as a belief (Attala 2017).

Methods and Setting

My first contact with the practice of dieting plants goes back to my time in Peru, I volunteered in Takiwasi centre, in the city of Tarapoto, in northern part of the country. Takiwasi is a research centre for traditional Peruvian medicine and a therapeutic community founded upon the principle of joining the healing and plant knowledge of the Peruvian Amazonian medicine to psychotherapy and offer a healing path out of addiction (Politi et al 2018). The founder, French physician Jacques Mabit was apprenticed under a Quechua shaman of the area and subsequently developed further knowledge of plants thanks to the teachings of other healers (Demange 2002). Takiwasi relies on the use of a number of plants in different healing rituals and identifies the physical, psychological and spiritual qualities of their action (Politi et al 2018), Moreover, it also opens its doors to the public and regularly, both tourists and locals are allowed to participate to the plant based healing rituals (Demenge 2002). Takiwasi has undoubtedly contributed to bringing awareness among westerners of the therapeutic potential of Amazonian medicine and contributed to its development in the region (Demenge 2002).

I became increasingly acquainted with the therapeutic program of Takiwasi which includes the use of ayahuasca and other medicinal plants as emetics known as purges (for spiritual, psychological and physical cleansing) and as plants to be dieted. My research began by writing to Jacques Mabit, the founder of Takiwasi to ask him about individuals he knew of who were currently conducting diets with European plants. He connected me to Ghislaine Bourgogne, Celine Cholewka and Isabel, my three future informants. Ghislaine apprenticed in Takiwasi in the use of ayahuasca and tobacco and subsequently developed diets of rose and tobacco in France. She has founded an association called La Maison qui Chante, which represents Takiwasi in France and is committed to support the research of Amazonian medicine and in offering tobacco purges as well as rose and tobacco diets to the French public. Celine apprenticed with an indigenous shaman of the area around Takiwasi and subsequently founded an association called Pachamanta in France which offers healing rituals based on Amazonian plant medicine and Siberian shamanic knowledge. Isabel also trained in Peru with an indigenous shaman and later developed her learning of purging plants in Takiwasi. She then returned to Portugal and offer diets with plants which grow in Portugal and in Peru. By joining these women to a common background, Takiwasi can be considered the setting and starting point for this research.

The topic could not be investigated in a single site as diets are usually one week long and some shamans only conduct a few a year. Therefore, my study was based on research with all three women and their

patients. Participant observation was carried out in two different locations of France with Celine and Ghislaine and interviews via Skype were carried out with Isabel. The research takes a multi-sited approach which also implied a re-negotiation of my role in these different sites (Marcus 1995).

Selection criteria of patients

The selection criteria of the patients was based on their experience dieting in a European context with plants that grow in Europe. All three shamans provided me with the contacts of some of their patients. Through snowball effect, I was also put in contact with the patients of the fourth shaman in Spain who did not participate in the study. Overall, I had the chance of Skype interviewing 18 patients who had dieted under 4 different shamans.

Interviews

All interviewees were handed a prior informed consent form via email in which the aims of the thesis and the right to anonymity were stated within the context of no harm done. All interviewees and shamans were anonymised with pseudonyms for the first version of this thesis, handed in at Kent University in October. Subsequently, Ghislaine Bourgogne and Celine Cholewka asked me expressly to reveal their names in this second edition as they are interested participating in scientific research and in promoting the visibility of plant diets.

My interviews with patients started by introducing myself and explaining my research interests and my personal passion for the topic. Having done a plant diet myself, certainly contributed in creating rapport (Leech 2002) with my interviewees. However, being more experienced compared to some, whilst less compared to others might have also constituted a bias as to what they shared with me. Nevertheless, I never refrained from being open and honest and sharing was a way of reciprocating their availability and time. Moreover, I assume that knowledge cannot be objective, it is created through a relation between the researcher and the informants (Dev 2018). I considered disclosing my research aims and experience with dieting plants as a valuable element in generating knowledge and a relation with them.

The interviews were conducted in English, Italian and Spanish. Often the informant was not interviewed in his or her first language and this constituted a limitation. However, it also allowed for the exchange to be slower and as a result for me to be more aware of the themes which were being touched upon in the conversation and explore them in more detail. The questions were mainly semi structured. They were aimed at capturing their experience of plant dieting, why they were attracted to this practice and the effects it had on their lives. I also reserved a section to inquire on their understanding of the plant, how they perceived its efficacy and action and what kind of entity they perceived it to be. During the interview I was particularly attentive to the way they talked about the plant and how they framed their healing in relation to it.

Fieldwork with Ghislaine

With Ghislaine I had the opportunity of conducting participant observation during one of the diets she leads in the summer. I observed the meeting Ghislaine, her staff and the participants had at the beginning of the week, in which patients shared the reasons and motivations leading them to participate in this diet. Ghislaine and her staff introduced themselves and presented some of the principles and rules of this retreat. During the diet, I had the opportunity of helping out distributing meals and this gave me a chance to visit the patients as they were dieting and witness the short exchanges they had with the staff when they were given food. I also observed how the plants were prepared, and the healing rituals Ghislaine and her staff complemented to the diet and some of the conversations between the staff.

Most of the exchanges were in French. I often resorted to translation when I did not understand interactions between staff or during parts of the opening and closing meeting. However, the language barrier might have also been a positive factor in some cases. When the staff brought lunch to each individual patient, there would be brief, informal conversations on their overall state. Patients were often going through intense emotions, vulnerability and fear. The language barrier did not allow me to fully witness their state and this provided them with a layer of protection. Moreover, this possibly allowed for these interactions to be less altered by my presence as patients knew my understanding of French was limited.

Once the diet was over, I had the opportunity of interviewing Ghislaine and her two assistants. I used both open ended and semi structured interview techniques. I was interested in understanding how her relationship to plants evolved as she became apprenticed with plants, therefore engaged with the life history technique to capture the role of plants in the broader picture of her life.

Fieldwork with Celine

Fieldwork with the second shaman of my study, Celine, took place at her house, which is also the locus where she conducts diets. I stayed with Celine some days prior to my own plant diet to interview her and observe her work. I adopted both structured, semi structured, and open ended interview questions focusing around the topic of how she developed the use of dieting plants in her home country. Also, questions focused on her concept and idea of plants and dieting, the relation she has to plants and how these come into her daily life.

Another main source was based on my own experience dieting birch under Celine's guidance. I dedicated time to record both the technical and experiential aspects of the diet. If diet can be considered an encounter with the plant, participating in one myself allowed me to capture the time of this encounter. During a diet there is another temporality, another perception of feelings and sensations, something difficult to capture once it is concluded. Furthermore, in order to talk about the worlds of plant spirits as an ethnographer it becomes very important to participate in these practices. (Glass-Coffin 2010) As Dev (2018) contends, "in

the absence of disclosure of the researcher's own process encountering (or not encountering) spirits and plant beings, ethnographic description often relegates these spirits and plant beings to the realm of supernatural Indigenous beliefs" (Dev 2018:193). Taking distance from informant's views causes a divide between the researcher and the informant. Furthermore, it risks rendering the researcher a privileged knower and reinforce knowledge hierarchies (Dev 2018). Although this research does not deal with indigenous knowers, failing to integrate my experience would risk confining informants to distant "others". (Dev 2018) To this end, I was committed to both participate in a diet and report my experience of encounters with plants.

With a similar commitment to decolonise research, Barrett (2011) proposes a thesis dedicated to "explore issues related to working with nonhuman "others" as co-participants in, rather than objects of research" in academia. (Barrett 2011: 123). She claims that beyond the variability of cultural context, relations to non humans can be considered important contributors to "a researcher's way to coming to knowing" (Barrett 2011: 128). In this respect, given that I have formulated ideas and concepts from my thesis during the my birch diet, I cannot not fail to acknowledge that this plant has participated in the grounding ideas of this thesis.

Data processing

Interviews were all recorded with a smart phone and transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, they were coded for key words and themes in which people talked about plants and their relation to them (Ryan & Russell Bernard 2003). Initially, I posed particular attention to the excerpts in which people talked about plants and how they related to them. These were listed and organised by themes, and causal relationships were identified. Given that two of the shamans I focused on presented differences, I preferred presenting their data separately in two chapters in order to capture the variability and nuances which exists in the world of plant diets. Also, given that patients do not have the same knowledge of plant diets as do shamans, I preferred dedicating their experiences a separate chapter. This attests to the multi-sited (Marcus 1995) nature of my study and in capturing the different realities which exist in relation to this practice.

Limitations

One of the main limitations in this study is that these experiences are very hard to verbalise and explain in words. What happens on an embodied level cannot be translated in a detailed and fully coherent account. Many manifested difficulty putting their experience in words. The experience of dieting may also involve memories of difficult moments in life or inner conflicts. The scope and ethical stance of the research lead me to adopt a non invasive attitude and invite participants to talk about the aspects of diet they were happy to share with me.

Furthermore, dieting plants should specifically take part in isolation and mostly in silence. It is not a particularly social activity as patients must remain in the vicinity of their hut or tent and connect to nature. My research during this time was limited to brief interactions between staff and patients or on the conversation between staff. The experience of dieting subsequently captured through people's narratives

once the diet was over, only provides a partial account of the meaning and function of this practice. My personal experience and account partially contributes to fill this gap.

Finally, by focusing on specific themes, this dissertation fails to provide a thorough account of the practice of dieting. The theme of Christian belief emerged as an important element in the life of a number of participants' experiences. The decision to focus exclusively on the theme of relation with plants lead me to exclude this aspect from my thesis. This constitutes a limitation in thoroughness whilst it allows for a more in depth handling of my focus theme.

Chapter 1

Signs from the cosmos: a shaman's personal development with plants

Introduction

This chapter will present parts of the life history of Ghislaine Bourgogne, a psychotherapist and psychoanalyst who apprenticed as a shaman in Peru. It will focus on how she decided to travel to the Amazon, how she was healed through plant medicine and how she subsequently started working with the rose plant in France. I will explore how the human-plant relationship participates the production of self, by looking at the role of plants in Ghislaine's narratives of personal and professional transformation. Her formation in psychology and shamanism provides us with an interesting context of inquiry into the way diets may be experienced and understood through a psychological lens. Gearin (2015), Fotiou (2014) Labate (2014), and Rodd (2018) who write on the internationalisation of Peruvian shamanism refer to the trend of psychologisation of ayahuasca use, meaning that the influence of western consumers both in Peru and abroad, has led to the formulation of rituals and experience through a more psychological and therapeutic lens. It is argued that this may lead to reinforced individualised notions of the self (Rodd 2018; Gearing 2015). As a counterargument, I will rely on further anthropological literature on Neo-paganism (Morgain 2010) to illuminate how Ghislaine's psychological approach to diet may contribute to less individualised notions of self and a sense of self founded on relationality to plant spirits.

Setting

Ghislaine is sixty years old and an experienced French psychoanalyst and psychotherapist. She lives and works in the city of Lyon. Twice a year, with her assistants François and Cecile Delonnay she organises and leads a diet for ten to twenty individuals, based on the ingestion of Rose and Tobacco in the French countryside. This is where I met Ghislaine, in a secluded farm in the country side, nestled in the regional natural park of Vercors, south west from the town of Grenoble.



Meeting Plants

During a time of crisis, Ghislaine felt stuck both in life and emotionally. She participated in a ritual with the Navajo shaman to gain insight into the next step she wanted to pursue in her search:

I decided to do something very simple that American Indians do. You go in the mountain and you stay 4 days in a circle, you have no tent, you are outside, even if it's raining. So I went in Spain and I drew a circle and I didn't move for 4 days. You can't sleep. You have to stay in a posture, you can't lie down, and if you are too tired the advice is to choose a place by a rock so you can sit against it. If you lie down you would abandon your waiting posture, you have to be like a hunter looking for direction. After 2 days the wind started to blow, the wind is very strong there, it's near the sea and it made me drunk it was so strong. But I wanted to stay, and after a while I leaned on the rock and had a vision. I saw the moon and stars and the horizon line of the earth. And then I felt someone shaking me saying "wake up 'cause the moon wants to talk to you". So I woke up and saw the moon and the stars with the horizon, exactly the same image as in my dream. Same moon and same vision. It was like inside and outside made like that (she crosses her hands into one another.) And then I received a feeling, like food coming to me, but it was not material, something from the moon, and I received it. I laid my head on the rock, not really sleeping, and had another vision. And it was a lady who was dancing, she had leaves as arms. And she said "come to me I will teach you, you need that, you need me to teach you." And then I went out and did not know what had happened. I had a feeling I let go of a lot of things in this place but did not know what. And then, one day someone gave me the newspaper and there were different synchronicities. I read that a group of doctors and psychologists were going to the amazon to have an experience with a plant. And it was a plant that drives you on the other side of the mirror and was related to the moon in the cosmology, and there were many synchronicities at the same time. So I traveled to Peru and went to Takiwasi and I tried this medicine. And I found it so strong. So I decided to go on.

During this time on the mountain she had a vision of the moon and a female plant-like figure who told Ghislaine to come to her for teaching. Reading on the paper about psychologists going to the amazon to experience ayahuasca and that this plant is linked to the moon, inspired her to pursue this path. She travelled to Peru in 1998. While she was in Takiwasi, she claims that plants supported her and guided her out of this state of crisis or feeling "blocked", by drawing her attention to one of her passions in life. During

her diets, she started drawing intensely and even having dreams about drawing, connecting to her childhood memories and to her strong passion for manual work. She also became aware of how family problems she experienced when she was young, distanced her from art. She described this as a “curve” leading her away from her artistic side. She said that during diets, plants told her that in order to continue her work as a therapist, she needed to start engaging with art again “or else her heart would collapse”. Subsequently, she began six years of intense professional training in gilding and woodwork, often questioning herself whether she was too old for it, but plants always encouraged her to go on.

“Receiving” the rose and other signs

Ghislaine “received” the rose in an ayahuasca ritual. This means that a rose appeared, descending from above and came towards her. This indicated she should work with its spirit. In a second instance, Ghislaine was dieting tobacco in Takiwasi and part of a famous popular French song would repeatedly play in her mind. The song was called *Mon amie la rose* (my friend the rose), a 1960’s song by artist Francois Hardy. Ghislaine did not think that this song was important; she felt frustrated and angry because this particular diet was intense and hard and felt did not give her much revelation. During the diet, in response to her anger the tobacco spirit appeared in her vision and said:

"you don't have to be angry, this is a song for the medicine."

A song for the medicine means an *icaró*, a healing chant which embodies the healing power of a plant and used by shamans to invoke plant spirits (Luna 1996). Ghislaine listens to the song again and realises its depth. Initially she did not want to talk about this song thinking “who cares about a popular French song?”. Once she returned home she researched the song and found out that although it was sung by the famous singer Francois Hardy, it was actually written by Francois’ friend, Cecile. Ghislaine discovered the two had studied together and Cecile had written this song but no producer was interested. Francois wanted to help her friend and offered to sing it herself, against the opinions of her advisors. Mon Amie la Rose became the song Francois is most known from.

At a later stage, Ghislaine’s friend and colleague Celine Cholewka asked her to sing the rose song as an *icaró* for a woman. Ghislaine was hesitant but she trusted Celine and the song proved effective. Ghislaine subsequently found out that the day she first sang the *icaró* was also the one year anniversary of Cecile’s death, the author of the song. She was moved by the power of these signs and called her teacher Jacques Mabit, from Takiwasi. He reassured her saying that it did not matter that the *icaró* was a popular French song, it was her *icaró* and she should sing it. He confirmed to her that the rose was her plant, meaning she should work with it as a diet plant with her patients.

Another significant sign was when someone who she works with brought a rose stem to a tobacco purge one day, before Ghislaine had decided to work with the rose as a diet plant. This rose was left in a plastic bottle for a long time, dried out, but then new flowers bloomed from it. It was subsequently placed in the earth where it struggled to survive at first. It became very strong and in 2018 the plant had made 30 rose

blossoms. Ghislaine says "this was the process with the rose. And then slowly I started curing the people with it."

Relationship with the rose

Ghislaine's relationship to the rose, however, is not recent or exclusive to her practice of shamanism. When I ask her why she thinks she received the rose, out of all plants, she reflected back on her life. She identified both her predisposition towards this plant and a number of signs that came her way, which reveal the plant's role in guiding Ghislaine in her life choices.

I have liked roses all my life. When I was a child I was drawing roses, I would carve them in stone. And there is a story, I don't know if it's real, maybe its a legend. So my father married twice, the first was my mother and the second wife is the mother of my sister and brother. I like them very much but my step mother, it was not easy for her to raise a child from a previous wedding and she was a little bit jealous. And we had a country house, and the neighbours gave us three children rose plants, one for each child. So my step mom planted the two plants for her two children near her house and mine was left very far away on the stones. I did not know that and, years later she was crying because we did a lot of work together and we could talk about many things later, and that's very nice. And she was crying and said "I have to confess something to you, I put your rose on the stones, far away from the house, but I was the one which grew the most, but it was the strongest, it grew on the stones in a very strong way", and this was touching when she told me that, she was crying. And I thought it was strange.

Then there is another story with the rose. My son was only 10 years old, it was the beginning of the school year, he had a bag with all his books and he forgot it at the bus station. And he came home and cried and was saying "oh no it's lost" and I told him "Maybe not. We don't know, maybe some people will see it bring it to the lost and found." Let's wait. And I was phoning the lost and found offices. And then after three days somebody put it in the lost and found so he was so happy. And then I told him, we should buy some flowers for the person who brought it back, but we didn't know who it was, because the person didn't leave the name. So we went to a flower seller to put flowers in the house as a thanks for this person, as a symbol. So he went with me, and when I went in the shop I changed my mind when I saw the white roses, it's always white roses, all the time, and I say "this rose is beautiful, maybe we take a rose?" And he said "yes". So I put it in a plastic bottle. And the rose began to dry...and then another rose grew out of it. So when I saw it growing after 2 months, I took the rose and brought it in this ceremony with this Navajo shaman. And because

in the ceremony there was a fire I offered the rose, and in this ceremony I went very deep in the psyche and I saw something was going on, and I was in a block and I could see it very deeply. So then I decided to do this vision quest, by going in the mountain, so then I did it and had this vision. Etc etc. So I see the rose gave me a new indication.

Ghislaine identifies these coincidences, in relation to the rose, during her life as synchronicities. She explained that synchronicities are present because they are the language of plant spirits. She adds that one notices them more when there is a stronger connection to the unconscious. By dieting plants, she adds, one becomes more in touch with the unconscious and hence becomes aware of signs from plants.

Working with the rose

By dieting rose, Ghislaine studied the effects and properties of the plant. She said the rose spirit is a simple, white and generous presence. It is tenacious and never gives up. The spines represent the sorrows and pains of the heart and the flower represents radiating love. If one diets rose, it connects one to the emotions of the heart. It builds a connection to death and the immortality of the soul and allows the participant to work on transgenerational traumas. She adds that by dieting or “working with the rose” one moves beyond its outer beauty and its smell, and it becomes a master plant which people can feel on an unconscious level. Ghislaine mentions that her current relation to the rose is based on taking care of her rose plants, which she refers to as being her friend. She also states that maintaining the qualities of the rose in herself is a way of nourishing her relation to the rose. By dieting the rose, Ghislaine discovered how its effect is heart



THE ROSES GHISLAINE PREPARES HER MEDICINE WITH

opening. Thus when there are “spines”, in the form of sorrows and difficulties in her life, she tries to accept them. She explains it has to do with the Virgin Mary’s attitude of being open to difficulties, letting events

mature and maintaining a meditative silence and an openness to help people. Being attentive to people and keeping silent and centred is a way for her to nourish her relation to the spirit of rose.

Plants meet psychology

The lack of literature on the use of plant diets beyond Peruvian contexts leads us to focus on literature detailing the way ayahuasca rituals are being reformulated in western contexts. These authors reveal patterns of psychologisation and individualism in the way these rituals are conducted and experienced. The first point to consider is Labate's (2014) claim that "the most evident feature of the process of expansion and internationalization of Peruvian vegetalismo is psychologization" (Labate 2014: 5). She notices how the figure of the shaman is often conflated to that of the psychiatrist in the west. Because Western people may lack or have limited avenues of interpretation of their visions during a ayahuasca ritual, these are understood through a psychological framework (Fotiou 2014). Therefore, spirituality becomes psychologised in that the religious and the cosmos become tools to therapeutically look at the psyche (Fotiou 2014). Subsequently, negative experiences are interpreted as facing one's inner demons or expressions of inner conflicts, rather than actual encounters with spirits (Labate 2014). Gearin (2015) mentions that rituals are constructed in a way that focus the universe on the individual to gain self knowledge and awareness. The therapeutic and personal development quality of ayahuasca in the Australian context, is based on connecting to the self, "not by relating to others or exploring an open-ended cosmos but by expanding and reinforcing one's self inwardly" (Rodd 2018 : 335). Rodd also argues that the ayahuasca plant spirit is seen as part of a higher self rather than as an actual entity. Thus, he concludes what is referred to as spiritual growth reinforcing an immunitarian individualism, which reproduces "a culture of narcissist alienation" (Rodd 2018: 339) As Labate (2014) also contends, shamanism might be one of many possible avenues available to respond to modern subjects' quest of finding the self, and to define their identity and life.

Some of the elements of psychologisation are also found in Ghislaine's way of framing her experience. She resorts to shamanism, among other options to pursue, in a time when she feels her emotions and life path are "blocked". This echoes with Labate (2014) in identifying shamanism as one of the various options available to support the modern self in finding out how to live one's life. According to Ghislaine, it appears that the therapeutic effect of plants relies on their role of favouring and guide introspection. The rose offered at the Navajo ritual contributed to her deep introspection and resulting decision to go on a vision quest. Subsequently, plant diets allow her to acquire self knowledge on her experience and reaction to a difficult childhood and adolescence. Plants, therefore, functioned as a lens into her childhood to identify the source of suffering and allow her connect back with the child who loved manual work and carved roses in stone. Through this realisation, Ghislaine receives encouragement from plants to pursue her talent, as it will provide her with a more material activity to sustain the spiritual and psychological work with patients. It appears from Ghislaine's narrative, that her experience is "psychologised" in Labate's (2014) terms in that plants act therapeutically by guiding her out of a feeling of difficulty giving her introspection, connecting her to her inner world, resulting in the release of a more authentic self and identity. This seems to fall in line with

some of the arguments of Gearin (2015) and Rodd (2018) on how in ayahuasca rituals are aimed at discovering the self by projecting inwardly.

Labate (2014) contends that ayahuasca rituals in western contexts are characterised by a trend to self diagnose psychological patterns and self prescribe one's path towards healing. This allows meanings to be defined by the individual, reproducing individual autonomy and an individual based sense of self (Gearin 2015). This is partly exemplified in Ghislaine's case: as she progresses in her use of plants she acquires a form of self clarity on her past and as a result, an empowered direction towards healing. Her ability to acquire vision on her life relies on her recognition of signs which lead her out of her crisis.

I want to argue, that Ghislaine understands these signs are coming from the indications of people and of plant spirits and are not solely self prescribed. For example, she says plants give her the strength to pursue art and that she would not have pursued this without them. It is the spirit of tobacco which tells her to pay attention to the song of the rose, it is her teacher who confirms to her that she should begin using the rose plant in diet and it is her friend and colleague Celine who tells her to sing the rose song she received as an *icaro*.

Moreover, her idea of personal development is actually reliant on ideas of collaboration and co-dependence. This is also echoed in the way she emphasises the story of the two singers who, only through joining their forces, gave life to that song. Her path leading up to working with rose is thus constructed through specific events and relations. She understands the diet of rose as a form of "working with the rose", again in sharing collaboration. This challenges the observation on individuals self prescribing their path towards healing (Labate 2014), and privileging individual autonomy. I argue that by engaging with plant diets, Ghislaine increasingly allows her path to be lead by signs and becomes aware of how it is co-produced by the people, plants and situations surrounding her. This partly echoes with Ingold's "relational constitution of being" (Ingold 2006: 130) whereby Ghislaine's being is conceived of as a "process of becoming" through entanglements of relations with the environment.

Moreover, I will argue that it is precisely the psychological therapeutic nature of her work with plants that creates and reinforces her awareness of these signs and leading her to recognise that her path is a product of her interconnection with spirits of plants. Ghislaine mentions that dieting enables greater connection with the unconscious and that connecting to one's unconscious results in noticing the signs from the plant world. Greenwood (2005) who studies paganism in England, highlights how noticing coincidences and connecting them with meaning, is a process which diverges from rational thinking and necessitates a shift in one's way of perceiving and understanding events. More specifically, Morgain (2013) clarifies that coincidences or things which "recur" (Morgain 2013: 191) are interpreted as the cosmos trying to bring attention to something. Morgain's view helps us to understand Ghislaine's psychologisation as doing more than sustaining a self which finds connection to its inner world. Instead, it allows her to acknowledge the spirits of plants, read their language and accept guidance in her decisions. This is evinced, for example, when Ghislaine decides to go to Peru and learn from Ayahuasca when she understands her vision of a plant like woman in her dream as the spirit of Ayahuasca. One could argue then, that psychological approaches

may coexist with a recognition of spiritual beings and with opening forms of communication and interconnection with them with them. This case is in contrast with Rodd's findings on Australian ayahuasca drinkers, whose personal development relies on individual autonomy and to a connection to self, rather than to others and to the cosmos.

In the Neo-pagan context, Morgain (2010) argues that the quest of finding the true self appears as an individualising practice, but is actually part of a process of personal transformation "along new and more enchanted lines, with a greater sense of their place among others and in the cosmos". (Morgain 2010:7). This belongs to a Pagan trend of pursuing transformation to understand the self, less as an individualised entity and increasingly through the interconnection to other beings (Morgain 2010). Although this is a different context, Ghislaine also comes to define who she is through relations with plants. The rose, and her relation to it, defines her work as a shaman now, allowing her to work on issues of transgenerational trauma. To an extent, her professional identity cannot be separated from the rose and the qualities of its spirit. Furthermore, Ghislaine acknowledges the rose spirit as embodied in her character and personality. The openness to pain and the meditative stance she has are character traits she acquired through the rose diets. This demonstrates that her self is coproduced and shared with the rose, pointing at Morgain's idea of finding one's place among other beings of the cosmos. This alludes to the complexity and coexistence of different notions of selfhood, where forms of individualisation and relationality intersect (Morgain 2010). Morgain's (2010) work helps us to identify the complexity of selfhood in Ghislaine's narrative, showing that through shamanic use of plants, she opens to different ways of being and relating to the world around her.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on capturing Ghislaine's life history in relation to the plants she has ingested in ceremonies and diets. Her narrative demonstrates that plants are integrated within a therapeutic discourse and their role is psychologised as they partake in her search for self-knowing. At first this may appear as if plants lead her to reinforce an idea of inner self and individual autonomy. However by looking more carefully, it also becomes clear that the quest of finding her true self leads her to develop an idea of path and selfhood which is highly interconnected to others, be it people or plants, and to her sense of place among them. This chapter allowed us to examine the human-plant relation through one shaman's narrative and through it we are able to conclude that the practice of dieting plants by a western subject may be involved in the acquisition of more relational notions of selfhood.

Chapter 2

A land for spirits: dieting as a tool for connection to nature

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the work and life of shaman Celine Cholewka, to document in more detail how the practice of dieting plants in Europe unfolds. This data is based on interviews with Celine as well as on the observations of her work during my own diet under her guidance. I will introduce her experience and motivation to diet the plants of her surrounding flora, explore the ground values upon which she conducts and leads diets with her patients, as well as the concepts of dietary and behavioural rules she relies on. My analysis draws on Von Stuckard (2002), who argues that western attractions to shamanism stem from modern subjects' needs to re-enchant nature and contest modernity. Through this framework, I demonstrate how the dieting of plants may serve the need to sacralise nature and merge with it. Secondly, I will shed light on how Celine's views translate in the management of her land. The discussion aims to identify some of the values informing her conception of diet and what meanings and practices this conception helps to reproduce.

Setting

Celine conducts diets in Pachamanta, on the land surrounding her home in Central France. Her land overlooks a forest and a small village in the distance. It extends steeply down to the river and into the forest. The latter mainly consists of beech trees, but her land is home to other trees such as birches and oaks and



VIEW FROM PACHAMANTA. PHOTO BY CELINE CHOLEWKA

to a few fields of wild herbs, flowers and singing crickets. Above her house is a vegetable garden where

Celine grows her food and some medicinal plants. She prepares her diets with the trees and plants of her land.

An Oak in the amazon: learning from plants

Celine originally trained as a herbalist in a naturopathy school in France. She is also knowledgeable with the practice of Touva Siberian shamanism which was transmitted to her by her husband. She moved to Tarapoto, Peru for a position as the head of a medicinal and cosmetic production laboratory. At that time, she began dieting plants for her own personal healing. During this time, she experienced powerful encounters with plant spirits, and her increasing acquaintance with the dieting tradition eventually led her to apprentice under a local shaman. This involved undergoing numerous forty-day plant diets.

During one of her diets, she heard a plant spirit voice tell her that the plants from her native French environment could also be dieted, and she received specific information about how to prepare oak tree medicine. After a few years, Celine returned to France, eager to develop her relation to her local plants. She went to a friend's house in Auvergne and prepared oak medicine from a 500 year old oak according to the preparation method she had learned in the Amazon.

“So yes, I tried it...I never experienced such a strong one-week diet... I had an incredible relation with the oak, I saw its spirit, I saw so many things, and I understood how it worked”.

She goes on explaining what she learned from the oak:

“The oak offers 7 gifts. It will give you strength, you know, they say “strong as an oak” then it will give you peace and a feeling of containment of your emotions, protection, rooting, and you feel verticality, it's very masculine and it gives you perseverance. And this oak was 500 maybe 600 years old. And it was as if it gave me the wisdom of time, as if I had received centuries old wisdom. I had so many dreams, so much with the spirit of the plant, as if it was inside me. It made me accept masculine energy, and was as if I was given a 500 years old energy! Because in 500 years this oak tree has been through a lot, it saw so many human beings on its way, it witnessed wars, it experienced a lot of snow, storm, water, sun and draught. It had to cope with it all during 500 years. Its cells absorbed the strength of all these elements to grow, and this is what he passes on to you. It's a magnificent plant for this reason... after the diet I had a feeling I was an old woman, as if the oak tree had transmitted me his age too. I lived birth and death with this tree, something incredible. Cellular knowledge, as if it passed on to me his DNA.”

Following the oak diet, she began dieting other plants which grow on her land. This enabled her to receive information on their uses and functions: what kind of pathology they can heal, how to improve the preparation methods, and for what kind of people they are suitable. According to Celine, oak medicine provides structure on a psychological level, rootedness, spiritual cleansing, peace and protection. On a physical level, she indicates it as a remedy for haemorrhages, incontinence and weakness.

Celine's learning began with herbalism and developed by dieting. Her knowledge builds through the experience of ingesting a particular plant, both in her mind and body, and what is revealed to her by the plant spirit during the diet. When she describes the healing properties of oak, Celine mentions three levels of activity: the physical, the psycho-emotional and the spiritual.

I noticed her descriptions include all of these elements and asked her to explain to me how she understands the different aspects of the plant. Celine took a pause to think about it and then answered: "Your question is very complicated, I am not sure I can answer it. What I can say is a plant is like a human being, you can't say your body is here and your soul is somewhere else. There is physical and spiritual you, and the same goes with plants. A plant, as every other living being has a chemical and a spiritual part. Every living being is like this". She adds that to connect to a plant in such a way requires dieting. In the paragraphs below, I will unpack some of the ways the dietary and behavioural rules are put into practice and how they are explained as promoting contact with the plant on different levels.

The function of dietary and behavioural rules

Celine argues that the process of dieting plants from her native environment gives her a chance to acquire the physical qualities of resistance and adaptation she needs to live here. When I ask her if it would be different to diet Amazonian plants she responds:

"The relation to the environment is not the same. One of the most important things that a plant diet does to you is put you in contact with the surrounding nature, and your own nature. So if you are dieting in a place where the plant grows and where it's accustomed to the climate... For example here it's quite hot in summer and winters are cold, with a lot of rain and wind and storm, so when you are dieting these plants you will receive their resistance to this climate. Also, if you are close to them and able to see them you will be more in contact with them both visually and sensorially"

Isolation and specific behavioural regimes of dieting are tools which promote contact with the physical environment and with the plant. Celine says that diet is a way of reconnecting to one's humanity in relation to nature. During a diet with Celine, participants are immersed in the surrounding environment, and they are not allowed to talk or see anyone else other than her, briefly, twice a day. Dieting takes place in one of two small wooden huts that Celine and her husband built. Washing is at the river, without soap or any cosmetic

products. One is surrounded by trees, the sound of flowing water, and the buzzing of insects, and might encounter deer, boars and snakes. There are no distractions allowed, apart from drawing and writing. Cosmetic products and technology might filter one's sensorial engagement with the environment and affect the perception of the medicinal plant. The feelings of space and peace and the availability of time allow unconscious patterns and emotions to surface which in turn facilitate the plant's effect on a mental and emotional level.



DIET HUTS IN PACHAMANTA

The food regime is said to make the person more predisposed to spiritual healing. The avoidance of salt is believed to make one's system porous, allowing the plant to penetrate the physical body at deeper levels and resulting in more efficacy. Moreover, it is said to open one's spiritual body to the spirit of the plant and of the surrounding environment. This is also why dieting in the city can put the person at risk of absorbing negative energies. Celine explains that during a diet, the lean food regime and the lack of distractions and things to do, slow down one's rhythm to approximate to that of plants. This allows for a person to connect to the plant and to the environment in a profound, spiritual way. She went on to explain that during a diet, a person's energy field is more open and the effect of *icaros* and blowing is therefore more effective. She explained to me that when she smokes and blows tobacco, she tries to bring movement to my system by bringing the healing effects of plant spirits to my body with these chants.

Finally, in order for a plant to heal spiritually, the medicinal preparation also needs to be prepared appropriately. The spiritual energy of the plant must be invoked following steps which shamans learn during their apprenticeship. From my understanding, it is not easy for Celine to explain these steps to me. Moreover, there is a degree of secrecy to her recipes. She does tell me that preparing a plant is not only about making an infusion or a concoction, it is much more. The act of preparing requires the shaman to have dieted the plant and to have developed a relation to it. By intimately knowing the plant, the shaman then knows which tree and which part of that tree should be used for that particular patient. It also means having received an *icaro* which allows the shaman to invoke its spirit within the preparation and charge the

medicine with its spiritual “frequency”. When invoking its spirit, Celine asks that the plant participates in the healing process. To this end she uses tobacco: As she is making her medicinal preparation, she chants over a tobacco cigarette, then lights it and blows the smoke on the medicinal preparation. Tobacco cigarettes are used as they have the ability to store and potentiate energies.

The role of the environment in diets

Gearin and Labate (2018) explore how the concept of diet in western ayahuasca contexts echoes with an individualised and psychologised attitude. They argue that diet becomes a way of embodying and reinforcing individual intention and that in fewer cases it is formulated as a way of encountering the plant spirit (Gearin and Labate 2018). They suggest that “the environment of the Western ayahuasca dieta appears to be primarily an individual psychological environment that drinkers encounter in visions” (Gearin and Labate 2018: 192).

I argue, that in Celine 's account, the natural world is nonetheless central to her formulation of diet. Celine 's learning from plants, for example, echoes with many of the observations Luna (1984;1986) made during his fieldwork with *vegetalista* shamans in the Amazon. He recorded how diet restrictions (of salt, sugar, fats) were functional to learning from plants by acquiring their physical and ecological traits, such as resistance to weather conditions. Celine also mentions the importance of dieting plants which grow in the surrounding environment to connect with them on visual planes and to acquire their resistance to climate as well as knowledge of the land's history. Differently from what Gearin and Labate (2018) found among ayahuasca drinkers, the environment she connects to is not solely her own psychological world, but actually consist in the physical nature surrounding her.

To better understand the way diet is formulated by Celine, I propose to consider Von Stuckard's (2002) analysis of western uses of shamanism. He argues that interest in shamanism may be traced back to a western origin of mysticism and philosophy of nature, stemming from the renaissance and nineteenth century German idealism. He refers to Weber (2013) to explain that the disenchantment of the world and the “sublimation of the sacred” (Von Stuckard 2002: 773) resulting from modernity, brought the individual to search for meaning and “retrieve sacred dimensions of nature” (Von Stuckard 2002: 792). The interest in shamanism thus emerges out of a “dialectic process of “disenchantment” and “resacralization” of the world” (Von Stuckard 2002: 771). I would argue that a drive to sacralise nature and merge with it is present in the way Celine conveys the function of diet. What Celine's account reveals is the importance of recognising plants both for their material and spiritual qualities. She stresses plants are just like humans, and they may be encountered on physical, mental and spiritual plains. In her account, oak is a physical being growing on her land, but also shares its memory, communicates in dreams, and is a bearer of knowledge. It is clear that Celine recognises the oak for its physical, and spiritual traits as well for its effect on her emotions and mind. Celine's attempt to reconcile the spiritual with the material aspect of plants echoes with Von Stuckard's (2002) idea of reanimating and re-sacralising nature.

Restrictions of diet and activity are formulated by Celine in a way which aligns with her conception of plants. The diet predisposes the person to a physical, mental and spiritual connection with the plant. Firstly, dieting slows down the system and makes it more attuned with that of nature. The physical body is made porous to the plant by eliminating salt and eating little food. The mind is freed from technological distractions and addictions. These conditions also cause the surfacing of emotions and thus expose one to the plant on a psycho-emotive level. The spirit of the patients is also made more accessible through the elimination of salt. These rules are said to open, soften, create space and bring things to surface, facilitating an encounter with the plant on all levels. For example, *icaros* are able to heal more efficiently when someone is dieting. Celine's formulation of dieting seems to echo with Von Stuckard's (2002) view of reaching "a mystical state of interconnectedness" (Von Stuckard: 781) with nature and using consciousness to seek guidance from other beings of the cosmos (Von Stuckard 2002).

A land for plant spirits and the ecological potential of diets

When I was walking up the mountain with Celine we had stopped for me to catch my breath. I was talking to her and noticed her gaze was focusing on something behind me, but not directly on me. I asked her if everything was ok, and she said yes. I turned around and saw nothing. I asked her "is it a spirit?", and she said "yes, but don't worry".

Celine sees spirits on her land. She told me that when trees are very old and big, the spirit can be seen more clearly. She explained that she is constantly directed by them in her life, and that they are the ones who have pushed her to remain on this land and in this house. Every day she goes into the garden and sings to the plants, and this allows her to take step toward their spirits. Sometimes information may be revealed by them as she is working in the garden. She receives indications about how to harmonise the ecological relations on her land: for example, spirits might indicate to her that a tree is suffering due to a larger tree falling towards it and that she must take care of it. Celine admits that her biggest mission for this place is to care for nature and protect the many ancient trees her land houses. Thus, connection with the spirits of her land is not only limited to healing individuals. It is also based on a need for a harmonious relation with the environment. This seems to be evinced in being able to share and manage the world with non-human others. Celine's lifestyle is aimed at preserving trees from deforestation and managing her land with environmental awareness. She grows organic vegetables, recycles, exchanges produce with her neighbours, avoids consumerism, uses a compostable toilet to save water, and has her patients and herself wash in the river with only natural soaps.

Gearin and Labate (2018) reflect on how ayahuasca and dieting in the amazon was traditionally part of a mediation with the environment, whereas "In contrast, the environment of the western ayahuasca diet appears to foreground a kind of psychological terrain in which a person's journey towards healing is largely private and mediated in terms defined by the individual" (Gearin and Labate 2018: 194). They add that people continue living in a capitalist and profane social space. (Gearin and Labate 2018). Their

consideration is certainly relevant to the study of diets in Europe. It highlights that people continue living in a capitalist world, where dieting certainly is not embedded in the daily production of personhood or mediation with the spirited cosmos, as might be in the case of indigenous cosmologies (Gearin and Labate 2018). However, it is important to point out that dieting may still play an important role in developing and negotiating relations with the plant world and that these may become central in influencing the daily practices of an individual in the environment. Dieting should not be looked at solely as a pursuit of psychological transformation, but rather be understood for its potential to produce new forms of relation to the plant world and the environment at large. For this reason, it is important to contextualise Celine's story within a framework of western approaches to nature in shamanism, as it may illuminate how dieting plants can translate into concrete actions towards the environment.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that plant dieting is part of a broader project by which individuals seek to sacralise nature and enter into a sharing relationship with it. Celine explains the function of food restrictions and isolation as methods of "opening" the person, to facilitate a connection with the plant world. Diets, in her understanding, allow for a deep connection with plants, on a physical, psychological, and spiritual level. Moreover, learning from plants is not only about learning their medicinal properties, but also about learning from their local environment and becoming part of it. This demonstrates that the attraction to Peruvian shamanism does not only speak of modern need for personal development and self-knowledge, but also of a need to enter into spiritual and harmonious relations with the environment, which have the potential of translating into ecologically sensitive attitudes and actions.

Chapter 3

Exploring diets as multi-species encounters

Introduction

Having explored the narratives and discourses of two shamans in the previous sections, I now want to dedicate a chapter to the experience of patients who have dieted plants in Europe. I will present the data I collected while interviewing a total of 18 participants who have dieted as patients in Spain, France and Portugal. In some instances the material will be complemented by explanations from shamans. Although the patients have dieted in different contexts, I have grouped them as one sample, with the intention of focusing more on the patient experience of plants and on the human-plant interaction that takes place during and following the diet. The aim is to explore the reasons leading patients to diet plants and the way they talk about and perceive plants during the diet, rather than on the difference between the dieting practices of their shamans. This will allow me to capture what role plants play in the healing process, and what kind of relations may unfold between patients and plants. I will suggest that plants take part in an active manner in the healing process of the patients, leading patients to recognise them as agentive beings.

I will briefly refer to the contribution Dev (2018) has made to the study of Ayahuasca and to how her views inform my approach in this chapter. Dev (2018) is an ethnographer who has dieted plants under indigenous shamans in Peru. She invites us to reflect on how the ontological and epistemological assumptions grounding different academic research, reproduce hierarchies of knowledge. According to a Western standpoint, plants have tended to be considered not intelligent or animate beings. Even anthropological stand points, rooted in western rationalist stance, often address the topic of plant spirits solely as cultural construct (Dev 2018). This, results in a limitation of academia to represent specific types of knowledge, reproducing exclusion of indigenous knowledge and of plants' ontological status (Dev 2018). By recognising indigenous knowledge of plants and thus plant subjectivity, one disrupts the human supremacy and the Eurocentric hegemony of knowledge (Dev 2018). Although my research does not engage directly with indigenous informants, it does relate to aspects of indigenous knowledge, given that my informants recognise plants as agentive beings. I will also include my own experiences with plants to avoid representing my informants as distant others. I will utilise the analytical framework of the Edibility approach proposed by Attala (2017), to attend to the agency of plants that is ascribed by patients.

Informants

The sample of interviewees consists in eighteen people, aged between 30 and 50 who were patients of either Ghislaine, Celine, a Portuguese shaman or a Spanish Shaman. All patients have dieted plants which grow in Europe such as rose, olive tree, basil, hawthorn, nettle and birch. Because tobacco is taken in

combination with rose in Ghislaine's diet, I have not excluded the experiences relating to it, even though it does not grow in Europe. The participants shared similar conditions during their diets: they have all spent one week or longer in isolation, surrounded by nature, ingesting one or two plant preparations every day. They all followed a diet based on either rice or grains such as buckwheat and millet. All participants reported there was no addition of meat, salt, oil, spices or condiments. Following their diets, they all followed a period of post-diet. This refers to a time (from 2 weeks to a month) in which certain dietary rules (avoidance of pork, alcohol, spicy food, sugar) and sexual abstinence are maintained, in order to prolong and not alter the efficacy of the plant. Participants were interviewed on Skype and invited to share their experience of diet and well as their perception of the effects of the plant.

Reasons to diet plants

During interviews patients referred to a variety of reasons which brought them to diet. Some stated health issues of mental or physical origin. For example, disorders such as autoimmune diseases, infertility, recurring infections or digestive problems were mentioned as grounding factors. One participant stated he did not find healing through biomedicine and was now interested in dieting plants because it struck him as a more holistic approach to health, which considered both psychological, spiritual and physical dimensions. A number of them referred to mental health issues or psychological patterns they wanted to work on, for example, three suffered from depression and two from addiction. Others were simply interested in improving their emotional dynamics in order to work on a particular topic of their personality. Federico, for example, mentions how the feminine aspect of rose and the masculine aspect of tobacco attracted him to work on his relation to his mother and father. Often, the reasons people were drawn to dieting were two or threefold and of both a psychological and a physical nature. Also, a few participants had tried ayahuasca or plant diets in Peru and were eager to be able to engage with dieting without having to travel overseas.

How patients talk about plants

In people's descriptions of their dieting experience, plants were given agentic qualities. For example, they were said to "cleanse the body", "show the path of healing" or "warm" a particular part of their body. An interesting theme which also emerged was that the patients were surprised or had to come to terms with the healing path the plant itself was guiding them into. Caroline said: "I came with some intentions but then I was surprised with the wonder of the tobacco process. My intentions had to change with the diet". In my own fieldnotes I find a similar reflection:

"It was very hard to stick to my own intention during the day. I thought I should use the diet to stay centred, focused on my breath and awareness. But sometimes very intense, almost obsessive thoughts and reminiscing took place which provoked anxiety and anger. During the first few days I tried to focus my intention and be calm. But I couldn't, the emotions and thoughts would take over. As the days passed, I slowly had to accept that that was the process of the plant. I accepted that the birch

was cleansing my emotions and thoughts and that these had to be experienced to be released”.

A similar experience is reported by Marc, who said: “at one point I felt it was hard, I had to make that step and accept the process of the plant”. He added that it was important for him to have an intention to heal, but also had to accept the autonomy of plant. Similarly, Federico said during the diet he felt he had to let go of his control and entrust himself to the intelligence of nature. Isabel, the shaman from Portugal that I interviewed, explained to me that “the plant allows for things to emerge when the person is dieting, it allows for the person to reflect on specific things, so maybe the person has an intention, but then the plant brings up something else”. The feeling that one has to come to terms with the intention of plants was a recurring theme. “Accepting the process of the plant”, or “accepting the plant”, indicates that plants, in diets, are ascribed intentionality in leading the person into certain physical and mental states.

Plants are said to show things to people they are not fully aware of. When the plant activates the healing process, this might help patients realise the physical, psychological or spiritual origin and manifestation of their illness. In my experience, I felt the birch was cleansing my thoughts and my body contemporarily. I had decided to diet for problems of altered intestinal lining porosity resulting from parasites. Through the dreams I had during my diets, the plant was showing me that my personal boundaries were also “porous” and had been crossed in the past, making me aware of “toxic” relations in my life. The plant, in my experience, was working on different levels of detoxification and indicating me the path for healing. One patient said that during the diet she perceived insect like entities coming out of her mind, as if the plant was cleansing her from an “infestation”.

A growing relation to plants

Ghislaine explains that as one becomes more experienced with dieting, the distinction between one’s personal projections and the message of the plant becomes clearer. It becomes easier to perceive the plant’s presence beyond one’s feelings. Even Celine says that patients usually become more open from one diet to the next and thus the perception and relation to plants becomes stronger. Similarly, Isabel stated that through her training with plants, she developed a skill to discern dreams that are hers from those in which plants are communicating with her. Also the patients who had experienced dieting more than once reveal that their encounters with plants became clearer with time. Mona, a patient, claimed that during her first diet she was very focused on her healing, whereas in her second diet she could “enjoy the connection with the plant” and described she allowed herself to be “hugged” by the rose. Raquel is a woman who diets every year from several years, at times for periods longer than a week. She explained that she was very skeptical of this medicine and that she did not understand how she could be healed by plants. After repeated and longer diets she “opened to the world of plants” and “understood how they work”. During her diets she has gathered interesting forms of encounters with plants. When talking about the rose now, she said

“I didn’t see the rose physically, she was more subtle, you just know something is there and that you are not alone. Other plants can be more physical maybe you have visions of it. When I dieted tobacco I saw him in my hut. I had a double bed, it was a very difficult diet, you get nauseous with tobacco. And I saw him, he said “I know it’s difficult but I am here, you are not alone, I will help you. Tobacco comforts you. I saw him like I see you now. I saw a face of a man with white clothes and dark skin”.

From these experiences it appears that as one becomes more acquainted with dieting plants, one may become more perceptible to recognise their presence. Mathieu, a patient who had dieted plants in Peru before, started dieting in Europe some years ago. He stated that as he became more experienced with dieting in Europe he realised “there is no difference between dieting an Amazonian plant and an olive tree, they both bring you in a process, they are plants that teach you in the same way”. Ghislaine, also makes an important point in this respect. She claimed that having “received” the rose, which is a plant that grows and can be found in her local environment, has the potential to make people understand that even in Europe plants are able to “come to us”, “to be felt through the unconscious” just as the ones in the Amazon. She continues saying this “tells us something about the nature of plants. It’s not only a cultural matter.”

The Edibility approach

A multi-species approach, more precisely, the Edibility Approach proposed by Attala (2017) is useful in engaging with the experience of patients and the agency that they ascribe to plants as in the case of Ghislaine and Mathieu. Attala (2017) suggests that the ingestion of plants is a kind of eco-entanglement, where through digestion, eater and eaten become materially engaged. As such, digestion may be conceived of as a relational event through which plants may influence and communicate with the eater. This approach offers a botanical ontology which allows plant agency to be acknowledged through the process of digestion (Attala 2017). She applies this lens to the plant tradition of Peru, to recognise the knowledge imparted to apprentices by plants as being generated corporeally. This approach allows us to illuminate the experience of the interviewed patients in a way that attends to the agency of plants during diets. The reactions people have during diets are often understood as coming from the influence of plants. Patients sometimes describe it as a negotiation between their own intentions and the ones of plants. Furthermore, they may perceive plant presence in visions, in the form of knowledge or in the acquisition of new ways of seeing their health and themselves. All these may be understood as a form of human-plant communication if situated within the context of Edibility. Therefore, the dietary food regime and the isolation become a means to be further emphasise the relationship to the plant by being more exposed to its phytochemical communication (Callicott 2013).

Furthermore, Shamans reported that people who have dieted plants for longer periods of time, seem to be able to perceive plants with more clarity. Attala (2017) refers to Beyer (2009) and reports a similar trend in *vegetalismo* where plants are more perceivable to people who have more experience dieting. Beyer (2009) reports that in this context, plants are said to build trust in the person and therefore might appear as a vision or simply allow for a relation to develop. According to Attala (2017), this too, may be understood as a

product of a material interaction with the plant world. She contends that “through experience and practice, humans know of edible plants assimilatively” (Attala 2017: 12) gradually becoming related to the eater.

Blending with the plant

Becoming plant like or feeling the plant inside oneself, have both been mentioned numerous times in interviews. This feeling is prominent not only during the diet, but may also continue after the diet. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, dieting can be framed as a way of creating space for a deeper penetration of the plant. This is echoed in the experience of Carla. She says “dieting means integrating the plant deeply in your mind, in your soul and in your tissues. There is an impregnation you don’t experience anywhere else. You make your body and your entire person available for the plant. The plant isn’t an addition to something else, it is the basis for what you are absorbing in that day.” She adds “it’s a feeling of the plant being part of you.” In another instance she told me that during the diet she felt nauseous : “the big deal was keeping it inside to feel its effects. That is when I melted with the plant.”

As mentioned previously, the feeling of plants being inside one’s self may also persist in time. Raquel said that since she has dieted tobacco, she notices its presence inside her. “Sometimes I know when it is him talking. When I’m talking and I am direct, when I say things very clearly, I know tobacco is there. He gives me his strength, clears my thoughts whenever I have to say something people might not like.” Another interesting experience she had is when she was once in the kitchen and she could smell a strong smell of rose, but there were no roses in the garden or at home as it was not in season. She asked herself whether the rose was there to tell her something, but then she thought “she just came to say hello, maybe I did not talk a lot with her so she just wanted to remind me she was there and for me to feel her presence”. Finally, Raquel said that when she travelled to Peru she felt the Peruvian plants inside her thanked her for taking them home. She said she perceived their presence more powerfully in her self when she was there. From these discourses it appears that plants are felt to penetrate and blend with the person during the diet. In the case reported above, plants may continue to be felt after the diet and contribute to the sense of self and identity. This resonates with Attala’s (2017) idea that plants do not only influence the person but might constitute their very beingness.

Becoming plant-like and lifestyle

During what is known as a post diet, people should stay away from a number of foods which can be toxic or disturbing to the plant. Even though people no longer ingest the plant, its effect and presence is said to persist if one does not engage in behaviour that disturbs it. For example, sugar is said to diminish the effects of the plant and spicy food reverts its effect and may cause negative physical reactions. Raquel mentioned that even after the post diet, there are things one can do to maintain the presence and strength of the plant inside.

“How you live your life, what you eat. If you take care of you also you take care for the plant. If you have a clean life, if you don’t exceed with things too much you take care

of the plants. If you talk to them then you have the communication, you need to reserve a little of your day to say thank you or hello. It is like a friendship, if you don't call for months, you cannot have the same quality of relationships. The little things like that. I called to see if you were ok."

Yet lifestyle change is not only intentional and aimed at preserving the plant, but also understood as an effect of the plant itself. Many say that dieting plants have made them more sensitive to, and disturbed by, certain stimuli. I had difficulty relating to people and preferred being with plants. When I came back from the diet I would walk down to the river and I felt I had to hide among the trees and look at the world from their position. When I heard voices, I had a feeling I was distant to people and closer to trees, as if I perceived some alert when around people. A number of people said that they are disturbed by TV and loud noise, and that they usually eat healthier and want to spend more time outdoors. One interviewee told me that after a few diets she changed her whole life. She quit her job in the city and moved to France in a small village surrounded by woods. Gaia told me "I think it's impossible to embark in plant dieting without becoming sensitive. I cannot be in a shopping mall more than 15 minutes, I feel sick. I can't watch television anymore, sometimes I have to do it out of politeness to people but I really feel sick. I feel well when I am in nature, in the woods. Its like you become a bit of plant". Gaia also mentions that her being a bit plant like makes her very sensitive to the condition of plants. Once she was in a hotel and all night she was in a state of anguish. The next day the mountain started burning. She said she had always been sensitive towards plants but with dieting this feeling amplified.

Another trend that I noticed is that a few of my informants dedicate themselves more to planting medicinal plants. Raquel and her husband both diet plants are when I interviewed them on Skype I noticed the different plant vases behind them. They told me that after having dieted the plants they felt the wish to plant them and take care of them. It thus appears that this behaviour is not only a guideline to follow but may be attributed to the plants' influence on the body. Attala (2017) states that the Edibility approach provides a way of reimagining human plant relations and that it might be time to "include human-animals as recipients of plant messages and consider the possibility that plants are aware of (even interested in) and able to influence and communicate with human-animals as they do with other species" (Attala 2017:9). Being eaten might be something plants utilise to influence humans and result in the latter developing greater attention towards plants. This might lead us to question whether the connection to plants resulting from diet may also be responsible for the patients' shift in behaviour manifested towards their environment.

Conclusion

This chapter mainly focused on the experiences of patients who have dieted plants in different places in Europe, including France, Spain and Portugal. It demonstrates how dieting leads them to a perception of the plant's healing intention. Taking into consideration the edibility approach allows us to look at this recognition not only from a cultural point of view but also from a material one. The digestive relationship which results the consumption of medicinal plants, might be playing an important role in the development of a corporeal relation to them. From this perspective the feeling of blending with the plant and becoming

plant-like may be looked at as a corporeal entanglement which contributes to a greater interconnection with plants and potentially influence human behaviour. This material outlook leads us to move beyond a cultural constructionist views accept the “world making of other than humans” (Dev 2018: 199) and allow us to engage in less hegemonic forms of knowledge. This argument provides an ulterior angle to address the interconnection to plants which may emerge through diets.

Conclusion

This thesis was aimed at documenting the way the use of plant dieting is developing in Europe with European plants, by telling the stories of people who practice it. By separately examining the life worlds of two shamans as well as the experiences of patients who have dieted plants has brought to light how the process of plant dieting may participate in developing individuals’ relationship to plants and to the environment. The first chapter examined one shaman’s narrative of healing and transformation to reveal how a western use of diet may rely on the psychologically therapeutic function of plants as has been found in the use of ayahuasca in western circuits of use. However, by relying on anthropological literature on neo-paganism, it also argued against the idea that dieting is confined to the development of individualised selves, but instead may be embedded in an understanding of plants as spiritual beings, and in the modern individual’s quest to develop a relational selfhood and a sense of interconnection to plants and the wider cosmos.

In the second chapter, considerations on the role of nature in Western neo-shamanism were drawn upon to decipher the concepts and discourses of one shaman’s approach to dieting. It revealed that dieting plants can be inserted in a conception of healing which does more than support individuals in finding self knowledge, but provides a means to re-sacralise plants and nature and merge with it.

In the third chapter, the Edibility approach was utilised to analyse the experience of patients and their encounters with plants. The merging and blending with the plant and the feeling of becoming somewhat plant-like, was addressed through a multi-species framework which recognises the material and corporeal relation which emerges through the digestion of plants which may encourage the feeling of being influenced by plants and interconnected with them.

In conclusion, it appears that plant dieting is being adapted as a healing practice in ways which accommodate western subjects’ need to heal physically and psychologically by acquiring self knowledge and transformation. This thesis demonstrates that healing psychologically through plants does not exclude a world view which recognises the existence of plants as spirits and the possibility of interacting with them through diet. In fact, diets may be part of a need to reinforce and open to a stronger connection to plants as well as a desire to find ways of developing a more relational notion of self and self-becoming, which is inseparable from the wider cosmos. Finally, it is important to contextualise diet within multi-species framework in order to move beyond its interpretation as a psychological and spiritual practice, but understand it as a human-plant interaction which articulates and rests on material levels as well.

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