

## Fire plants in the therapeutic process at the Takiwasi Center

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### What is Takiwasi?<sup>2</sup>

Takiwasi is a center for the rehabilitation of drug addicts and research on traditional Amazonian medicine, located in the city of Tarapoto, in the Peruvian High Amazon.

Although officially Takiwasi is just turning twenty years old considering it was founded in 1992, its gestation began much earlier, with the first contacts with healers in the region. These master healers or -vegetalista doctors as they are called locally- have lived from ancestral times in this region, which was pretty abandoned and with little presence of the Government until recently. Healers have effectively cared for the life and health of the population of Tarapoto and the Amazon.

The vocation of Takiwasi is to generate a space for meeting and articulation between ancestral knowledge, with its wealth and vast resources -especially plants- and modern therapy methods; this space is incarnated and enriched with the contributions and experiences of its workers, visitors, patients and volunteers. Takiwasi is a Peruvian private institution, self-managed and not subsidized by the State.

Most patients are local, many of them with low incomes. The cost of its treatment is subsidized or compensated by extra activities proposed by the Center, such as trainings, seminars, sale of products and others. For foreign patients, the treatment cost in Peru is low compared to their countries of origin. However, we also occasionally offer payment facilities to foreign patients.

At the beginning, the project was supported by a small group of people committed to the common dream of integrating different knowledge; few patients were attended. It has been growing in a process of mutual learning -of shared personal work- and the therapeutic model has been structured while the infrastructure was being built.

With an installed capacity of 15 to 18 patients in situ for 9 months, we currently welcome an average of 40 resident patients per year, mostly from the local region, many of whom arrive in very poor health conditions due to consumption: one fifth of patients consume alcohol, 11% cannabis and a similar percentage consume cocaine, but the majority suffer an addiction to cocaine paste (PBC in Spanish), a low-priced and very toxic substance, a byproduct of the manufacture of cocaine hydrochloride.

The San Martín region, where Tarapoto is located, has been the main production area of cocaine paste in the world, and this over the years has attracted many people to work in this clandestine industry, some of them drug consumers. This situation has begun to revert thanks to advances in local policies, and our region is currently an international model in substitution of coca crops for

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other alternative products such as cocoa, coffee, medicinal plants and spices, with the added value of being the first region of the country to be declared free of transgenics.

In the established therapeutic protocol, special attention is given to plant sessions, which can be depurative (purgative and emetic), psychoactive, such as the ayahuasca brew and the master plants used in a specific therapeutic process called "dieta". These sessions have been diversifying and increasing, and we have not had until now, fortunately, any serious accident to regret. I attribute this to our care in the handling of vegetable preparations and the respect for their traditional way of use. We use the plants according to the teachings of the healers, and with their consent.

### **The cold-heat concept**

After this presentation of Takiwasi, I would like to address the theme of the VII CISEI Forum: the fire element. The fire that evokes us heat, light, life, death... It's a powerful symbol closely linked to our vital processes, to transformations, to the visible and the invisible, to the conscience and to the shadow. I would like to start from the myth of Prometheus that tells us about fire.

Prometheus was a titan, intelligent and cunning, very creative, who modeled with his hands the human being. To inspire life into him, he stole a spark of fire from the car of the sun of Hephaistos, the god of fire. The supreme god of Olympus, Zeus, looks at this creation astonished - although at the same time distrustful, for his rivalry with the titans - and he replicates it: he creates Pandora and sends her as a present to Prometheus, who rejects her. Pandora then marries Epimetheus, his brother (and she opens, out of curiosity, an amphora that Zeus had given her and that contained all the ills that afflict humanity today. In the bottom, still kept aside, only hope remained).

Prometheus, annoyed, mocks Zeus by giving him in sacrifice the bones of an ox, instead of meat. In revenge, Zeus takes away from humans the use of fire and condemns them to die of cold in the harsh northern Europe winter. Prometheus, then, steals the fire of the gods and gives it back to humans, but for that he is cruelly punished: he is chained in the Caucasus mountains. By day a vulture devours his liver, which regenerates at night, in a repeated cycle that lasts thirty thousand years, until Hercules, feeling pity, frees him.

We find here several meanings for the fire, which at first is the divine element that inspires, gives life and consciousness: the "divine spark"... Then we see its cultural aspect linked to the evolution of humanity, the light around which the primitive clans are organized, the heat that preserves life in the freezing winter, the energy that allows to cook the food, that fire that Prometheus steals after the prohibition, to preserve the life of the human being... Was it because of compassion for humans or for saving his creation? For justice or for opposing the gods?

Be that as it may, this transgression, taking the fire of the gods without their permission, by effraction, is paid with his own vital energy. He remains immobilized, with no possibility of evolution or change, chained to the same rock, day after day, immutable, in the same position, in the same situation. His liver, the "energy center" of every human being, a place of food transformation and energy storage, is devoured by a vulture, and recovers at night, to be devoured again the next day, in a cyclic process that it is repeated for an eternal time, until a hero emerges ready to help him.

These images tell us at the same time about facts and situations that we observe in the patients here at Takiwasi, that suffer from various addictions: accessing the fire of the gods, the world-other, modifying their state of consciousness without initiation, without permission nor

qualification, through drugs used outside of ritual context, without a previous preparatory process... without integration ability!

What has been lived during the drug addiction experience does not allow embodying or incorporating the contents that have arisen, because it belongs to the intraverbal and numinous<sup>3</sup> domain, which chains, enslaves and, at the same time, terrifies the subject. There is no other meaning or goal than the experience itself, to which the person is chained, having to repeat it, coexisting with deceptive spiritual aspects that increase the emptiness, the vital fatigue. The hero will emerge from feeling the extreme of the situation; at that point there is a will to change, a decision and an answer to the call. The sacrificial fire appears, which cleans and purifies; the fire of the passion for life, the conscious acceptance of doing -for a greater achievement- something that hurts or costs. The inner fire that provides light to the path.

When exploring the meanings attributed to fire among the resident patients of Takiwasi, we find words that are repeated, which refer to the physical (P) and emotional/spiritual (E) level, which were rated positively (P) or negatively (N):

- PP: heat, masculine, light, culture, food, sexuality;
- PN: anger, destruction, danger, burns, pain, burning;
- EP: sun, consciousness, father, transformation, energy, spirit, purification, passion;
- EN: hell.

However, there is also a question of magnitude or momentum. Everything is relative, the temporary destruction precedes the reconstruction, a new order, and the excess of the good can also be harmful. Fire can heal and also make sick: it can be the passion that drives changes and actions, or the anger that unbalances.

In the Andean-Amazonian worldview, lack of harmony is seen as the origin of evil, and the cold-heat imbalance is very present. People get sick from lack of heat, that is, from cold, or from excessive heat, and each case produces different symptoms and characteristics. This conception of cold-heat is not exclusive to the Amazonian worldview. It is present in many other ancestral cultures, such as Chinese, Indo-European or Arab medicine, probably arising from the observation of nature and perhaps introduced into Latin America by the Spanish, who brought with them their medieval medicinal systems.

The treatment is simple, since it consists of balancing: diseases due to excess of heat are treated with "fresh" medicines or preparations, and cold pathologies are cured with warm elements. We tend to balance both the physical, emotional and spiritual bodies. On a physical level, the disease by excess of cold is characterized by low energy, slowness, apathy, shyness... This is most expressed in sexuality. The concept of "getting a cold" does not correspond only to the flu, but to "having cooled" certain organs, such as the ovaries, which causes lack of sexual appetite, difficulty during sex relationships, sterility and/or alteration of menstruation. On the contrary, the excess of heat can cause urinary infections, cystitis, irritation and inflammations in the genital area, both in men and women. There may be symptoms, such as cough or diarrhea, that can be attributed to an excess of cold or heat. According to the diagnosis, they will be treated with the opposite.

In the emotional sphere, the excess of fire not only causes alterations that are manifested in the emotional/invisible plan, but also affect the physical level manifesting in anger and impulsivity. Its lack generates reluctance, fear, shyness, and is expressed physically as inability to act

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<sup>3</sup> Relative to the divine power, to the essence of the sacred, with its components -according to Rudolf Otto- of mysterious, tremendous and fascinating.

(rheumatism, body aches) or energy deficit (liver, kidney and heart discomfort). This notion of cold/heat does not only refer to external factors, such as climates; it is also modulated by internal factors, such as the intake of some foods and plants.

In the Peruvian Amazon, prevention involves respecting certain prohibitions during the menstrual period, considered as a situation of internal heat. It is recommended to avoid bathing in cold water, consuming acidic foods or frozen drinks, because of the risk of "cooling" the reproductive organs and unbalancing the system. This extends to food, with the refusal to eat what has been frozen, because it is thought that, despite being cooked, a trace, an essence of cold, is retained as consequence of the freezing process that still present in food, and that can make you sick. In the same way, rainwater is not used for drinking or bathing, because it is "charged"; and it is necessary to bathe if one gets wet with rain, because it has a different, strong energy, which can make you sick.

This belief system -shared by different Amazonian populations- makes up most of the so-called "cultural syndromes", which for modern medicine do not exist, since they are unknown, there is no explanation for them or knowledge on how to diagnose them. These are processes of interaction with the invisible or spiritual world that modern science does not usually take into account. We have, for example *daño*, *mal de ojo*, *susto* (damage, evil eye, scare) or the "call of the deceased", which is when, for example, someone dies and does not resign to leave a family member -generally, a baby-, for the love that they felt toward them, and the baby loses his appetite and loses weight because "the deceased" wants to take him to the other world.

To treat these cultural syndromes and other diseases, Amazonian healers know a wide variety of methods, which Takiwasi has incorporated into its treatments. Plants are used, be they purgative, medicinal or psychoactive, associated with intangible, energetic methods. These plants and procedures are also evaluated according to the cold/heat system, in addition to other criteria, and the diagnosis must be accurate.

It is worth mentioning the use of *sopladas* or *icaradas* with tobacco smoke, with perfume or with cinnamon bark chewed if it's a baby. This healing procedure consists in "charging" with the energy of the healer any of the aforementioned elements, by means of prayer and/or healing chants (*icaros*), to then act through the tobacco smoke or by sprinkling the perfume on the energetic points of the patient, in order to balance their energy and reassure them.

Baths can be also prepared with aromatic plants and *ligadas* (bounds) are performed. The *ligada* is like a small sauna or chamber of personal sweating, where you put in a container some salt stones red-hot heated together with water with plants; the person sits on a stool (or stone) and wraps in a plastic cloth, in a blanket or something similar, to sweat. This method is very common in the region and is used with different types of plants.

### **Fire in its spiritual dimension**

In the spiritual realm, fire manifests itself in an altered energy, with signs of thermal imbalance that the person perceives and that make them say "I am hot, I am cold; my hands are cold and my head is hot". Those affected come to seek help because they have bad dreams or nightmares that scare them; because there are external signs that the energy of the person or of the house is not repaired -like finding bats or crossing vipers on the way, or being attacked by a dog or a certain animal. These signs indicate that the energy of the person is altered (the animals perceives the non-harmonic energy).

As affirmed by Jacques Mabit<sup>4</sup>, the excess of fire can make the person too extroverted, too imposing and with ego inflation; or, conversely, the lack of inner fire indicates a person with low self-esteem, shy, who does not make decisions and is easily led by "friends" (for example, in gangs). There are people who come because they say they feel "dirty", that there is something that is contaminating them. They do not know what it is, but they feel the need for purification, and in these cases, they come to ask for plants to purge, to cleanse themselves.

In this spiritual context, treatment is necessarily ritualized and is framed in a context of respect and acceptance. At the spiritual level, no act of healing should be done if it is not framed in a ritual. It is the ritual that allows to ask permission to the world-other, to receive the authorization to act and be effective following the rules of use of each plant. Otherwise, with an improper or mistaken ritual, the intervention can produce more harm than good.

In the treatment, certain plants are used to cleanse and purify and others to modify the state of consciousness, in addition to specific plants to rebalance the cold/heat system. In Takiwasi the purges are carried out collectively, each participant with its own bucket. We perform *icaradas*, blowings with tobacco, *agua florida* (flowery water) or cinnamon bark, to protect the purge and administer it. The purge produces, then, a catharsis, a cleansing not only on the physical level, but also on the mental and emotional level. When vomiting toxins, one also vomits rage, anger, annoyance with someone. The purge allows the simultaneous evacuation of these contents, which damage the psycho-affective level.

Some plants are called "fire plants" because they have mainly "yang" energy -if we were to compare it to the Chinese yin/yang energy classification system- that is, they are plants of a masculine nature, or spicy plants, or that burn. Among the purgative plants we use there are, for example, mucura and ginger.

We also use "sun water", that is to say water with yellow yolk dye exposed, or "charged", with the energy of the first sun rays, usually with the addition of a pair of camalonga seeds, a plant rich in strychnine. It is ingested during a week, approximately, accompanied by a strict diet - especially, avoiding sweets of feminine (yin) nature- and produces a very important energetic cleansing, especially in cases of impregnation of toxic spiritual energies in the nervous system, as it is found in cases of witchcraft, black magic, very strong spiritual transgressions and, sometimes, harmful legacies of the ancestors or harmful transgenerational charges.

Apart from mucura and ginger there are fire plants that are used in the particular process of *dietas*<sup>5</sup>, such as uchu sanango, ajo sachá or shillinto (a delicate handling plant, which raises the body temperature to 42°C-43°C and that combats severe infectious diseases). These plants, taken in the context of the *dieta*, give verticality, strengthen the will and are, at the same time, immunostimulants: they reinforce the psychic and biological identity of the person. They raise the temperature and healers say they "burn bad energies". They are also used in a simple preparation against rheumatism, because they "throw away the cold".

Sacred plants also share these cold/heat qualities (or yin/yang, for Chinese medicine). The cactus of sanpedro or wachuma is phallic, yang, masculine. It grows in arid, dry places, and when cut it presents the figure of a small sun... Likewise, the tobacco, an important healing plant in all America, gives yang energy, heat and protection.

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<sup>4</sup> Founder of the Takiwasi Center. Doctor and healer. President of CISEI 2014-2017.

<sup>5</sup> The *dieta* is a process of intake of master plants that requires isolation in the jungle, sexual abstinence, strict food norms -hence its popular name of "diet"- hygiene rules and precise rules of conduct.

The coca, the wilka and the ayahuasca, among others, are plants that have the power to burn, especially bad energies, but at the same time they are balanced because they have both male and female aspects. That's why, I think, they have that wisdom to balance: they are perfect. If one has a lot of masculinity, they bring them femininity; If one has a lot of femininity, they bring in the masculine side. These plants are so important that traditional medicine in Peru has been structured around them.

Healing does not only involve the visible nature of the plants, but also all that makes us consider their invisible, energetic and subtle dimension. In the context of *dieta* and purge, medicinal plants are stronger when cooked than when they are raw: the fire transforms and enhances its action.

### **Ritual dimension**

In Takiwasi we use rituals a lot and, unexpectedly, the ritual element that we use the most is fire, since it is around a bonfire where the rituals that mark various stages of the treatment are carried out. In each case, its transforming, purifying force is used. In the "passage ritual", the transition from an initial phase of one week of isolation to communal life, the new "home" is marked. At the end of the treatment, negative masks elaborated by the patients are burned, thus symbolically leaving behind their dark past. In the interim, the patient renounces objects or things that he symbolically associates with his consumption by giving them to the purifying fire. And there is also the use of temazcal, saunas, incense, ritual cleaning of the Center or of the maloca<sup>6</sup> before the therapeutic sessions, among other activities.

There is a specific ritual in which patients make lanterns of various shapes, each one symbolically expressing his inner light: "I help to illuminate the world with my inner light, expressed in this way". The ritual includes the will to forgive, the search for reconciliation with oneself and with everyone -those who offended us and those who were offended as well- and, finally, with the cosmic order, with which patients have generally been in war throughout his time of consumption. To mark the end of each year in Takiwasi, we release small hot air balloons, made by patients. In this way, they raise their desires to heaven for the coming year: the same fire that can burn and harm, if used correctly transforms and helps to spiritually rise.

The results are promising: 68% of the patients that complete the treatment by formal discharge are healed or feeling better. This is expressed in a better quality of life, in the renounce or notable decrease of their drug use. In some cases, patients return to the Center for short stays of reinforcement or to cope with critical episodes. The factor associated with the improvement is the discovery of their meaning of life and the commitment assumed with what inspires them in life. It also has to do with the awakening of his inner fire, his deep vocation.

Takiwasi's vocation is to generate the necessary exchange to preserve traditional medicine, and to articulate medicines for the integral health of the people, with the conviction and hope that this exchange -this dialogue between science and tradition, between knowledge- can lead to a mutual flowering for the healing of humanity and the earth.

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<sup>6</sup> Ceremonial house where purge and ayahuasca sessions are held.