



The role of icaros as therapeutic tools in psycho-emotional healing: An IPA study of musical experiences during the ceremonial practice of traditional Amazonian medicine (TAM) at Takiwasi

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ABSTRACT

Songs play a fundamental role in the practice of traditional medicine throughout the shamanic cultures of the Amazon basin. Alongside plant medicines, often administered in ritual settings, the songs or 'icaros' used by the curanderos or traditional healers of the region are considered to be powerful healing tools. This IPA examines the experiences of 6 participants attending the Takiwasi Centre in Tarapoto, Peru during a nocturnal traditional healing ceremony involving the ingestion of the psychoactive plant decoction ayahuasca; a ceremony representing a practice of Traditional Amazonian Medicine and part of the national cultural heritage of Peru. The study investigates participant experiences, perceptions of, and interpretive responses to the icaros, conveying the phenomenological features of the experience as falling into of bio-psycho-physical, cognitive and spiritual domains. The study identifies therapeutically-significant aspects of participant responses and behaviours in relation to the songs and interprets experiences transculturally in order to facilitate for further interdisciplinary enquiry in this area, with implications for better understanding these songs' potential to bring about strong experiences of psycho-emotional healing and catalysis of self-transformation.

Introduction and literature review

Music therapy and shamanism

Culture-centred models of music therapy (MT) recognise the importance of ancient musical healing traditions in cultures across the globe (Aigen 2014, Stige 2002), and acknowledge the relevance of the cultural origins of musical repertoire used for different patient / client contexts (Stige 2002).

Moreno (1995) argued for a more thorough enquiry into the traditional uses of music for healing across cultures, suggesting that interdisciplinary collaborative research around traditional musical healing practices had the potential to lead to the development of a 'new and integrated discipline' termed 'ethnomusic therapy' (1995 p336) which would be capable of better quantifying the healing / therapeutic impact of non-Western musical healing traditions. The contemporary discipline of medical ethnomusicology has now partially picked up this baton, investigating the potential psycho-medical impacts of culturally-situated musical healing practices (Koen, ed 2011).

A number of scholars have posited parallels between music therapy and shamanism; Moreno (1988) dubbing the music therapist a 'contemporary shaman'. Connections between shamanism and other contemporary arts therapies; i.e. drama therapy and psychodrama have been proposed and suggestions made for fruitful interactions between approaches. (Glaser 2004, Moreno 1999)

Aigen (2014) develops the discussion around the parallels between music therapy and shamanism, asking whether contemporary music therapy can be considered a modern 'continuation of shamanic practice' (p122). He proposes that major differences between MT and shamanism lie in the different perceived aetiology of illness and in their alignment with either a 'mystical, religious' tradition (shamanism), or a 'secular tradition linking science and art in the interest of healing' (p124). He further considers parallels with the MT technique of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM), suggesting that whereas in shamanic traditions the shaman enters the altered state of consciousness (ASC) in GIM it is the client who enters the altered state and argues that this distinction 'militates against' the argument for MT being a form of shamanism (p124).

Aigen notes that one motivation for MT's ongoing interest in exploring shamanic traditions is that it recognises them as representing 'the first efforts to effect self-transformation through music' (p124) and suggests that translation between the 'epistemologically equivalent' worldviews allows for 'a psychodynamic interpretation of shamanic healing', proposing that a 'contemporary mythology' of taxonomies of psychological structures is analogous to, and 'not inherently more rational' (ibid) than the beliefs in gods and spirits found in indigenous shamanic cosmologies. His position is that MT stands to benefit by critically integrating knowledge and understanding from shamanic uses of music, not by 'merging' with them (p125).

Kenny (2002) explains how her work focussed on 'how to make a bridge between contemporary music therapy practice and traditional, indigenous healing practices', (2002, p3). Working under the guidance of indigenous elders she wished, with caution and respect, to make indigenous knowledge accessible to music therapy for the exploration of 'clinical possibilities' (ibid)

Amazonian shamanism, music, and the therapeutic potential of ASCs

There is already a dense literature detailing the complex cultural, social, ethical, spiritual issues arising out of the internationalisation of Amazonian shamanic healing practices, which have extended beyond their origins to become a phenomenon of globalised significance (Labate 2014, Tupper 2009). Particularly under the research spotlight in recent decades is the plant admixture ayahuasca, a botanical decoction obtained from boiling the banisteriopsis caapi vine and, most usually, the leaves of psychotria viridis or 'chacrana' plant, forming the psychoactive brew which is a keystone of

traditional medicine in the Amazon. For discussions of the contraindications and psychological risk factors, see Dos Santos' chapter in Labate & Bouso eds (2013), Kavenska (2015) and Trichter (2010).

The current burgeoning of ayahuasca-related research sits within the context of a resurgence of research into the therapeutic potentials of a range of psychoactive plants and other substances. Richards (2016) and Tupper (2015) discuss the associated, re-emerging therapeutic paradigm of 'psychedelic psychotherapy' tracing its history, and discussing the therapeutic potential of 'transcendent states of consciousness' (Richards 2016, p328). Phelps (2017) proposes guidelines and competencies for therapists wishing to practice ethnically in this area.

Some of this recent research explicitly examines the therapeutic role of music in conjunction with the use of psycho-active substances. Kaelen et al (2017) for example evaluate the evidence for a central role of music within this emergent discipline in a study examining how patient experiences of music in conjunction with psilocybin impact on treatment-resistant depression, finding that music induced therapeutically useful emotions and mental imagery.

Also relevant to this study is the transpersonal stream within psychotherapy which emphasises the importance of spirituality / transpersonal issues in healing (Lewis 1997, Swan 2010, Odoriso 2015) along with studies of the transpersonal aspects of GIM (Abrams 2002, 2016, Blom 2011) not only due to its origins in experimental research (Bonny 2002), but because it uses an 'inner journey' as a means of accessing psychological material for healing (Bunt 2010).

Icaros and healing

This study focuses on **icaros**; the healing songs or chants of power of the mestizo 'vegetalismo' culture of the Peruvian Amazon, songs which are locally understood to be received from plants or animals (Luna 2006, Bustos 2008). Whilst traditions incorporating the ritual use of music into systems of natural medicine exist across the Amazon basin, this study focuses on a unique intercultural context in the district of San Martin Peru; the Takiwasi Centre for the Treatment of Addiction and Research into Traditional Medicines (See O'Shaugnessy 2018 for a recent investigation of Takiwasi's treatment approach and outcomes). At Takiwasi, meaning 'house of song' both traditional icaros from the region and newer songs are central to its treatment provision which incorporates both Western psychotherapy and ritual practices of TAM.

Icaros are an essential tool in the healing armoury of the shaman (Giove 1993, Luna 1992, cited in Bustos 2006 p34); they are both 'sources of personal energy' and 'symbols of their power' (ibid). According to Luna (2006) 'the number and quality of his icaros are the best gauge of the knowledge and power of a shaman' (p41). Icaros tend to have many repetitive features and simple strophic forms; they may be sung or whistled (Bustos 2006, p34) and are often accompanied by a leaf fan ('shacapa') or by other instruments 'either autochthonous or introduced' (ibid) She states that 'most icaros are characterized by regular, normally rapid rhythms, limited melodic variations, and two or three repetitive phrases'

Within Peruvian vegetalismo there is a complex knowledge & belief structure around icaros, their provenance, power and particular uses. Jauregui 2011 examines the common Amazonian understanding of teacher plants or 'plantas con madre' ('plants with mothers'); an essential or spiritual essence. Callicott 2013 argues that curanderos learn to communicate with these plant spirits via their initiatory training process and argues that interspecies communication allows the transmission of teachings - including of songs - from the natural world to the curandero or healer.

Bustos notes that a comprehensive study of the role of icaros in mestizo curanderismo is to be found in Luna's anthropological works: 1986, 1992 (ibid p12) Luna 2006 documents the traditional uses of icaros as employed by Peruvian mestizo shamans; intending to 'survey the most important functions'

of his informants' icaros' (p41) he lists the icaros of plants and animals and outlines their specific properties and healing functions. Icaros may be used for very specific functions; the icaro of the plant Bobinsana, for example, can be used to clarify the mind (Luna 2006 p42). Luna cites the five or more main functions of icaros; to call spirits, to 'modify the effect of ayahuasca and other plant teachers' (2006 p44), to heal, to invoke spiritual protection, or to win the love of a woman, whereas Beyer cites three:

'the icaros have three purposes: "to call spirits, to 'cure' objects and endow them with magical power, and to modulate the visions induced by ayahuasca" (Beyer, 2009: 66, cited in Callicott 2013 p33).

As noted by Bustos (2008 p9), existing studies examining the ritual of ayahuasca from ethnographic or anthropological perspectives tend to note the importance of icaros without examining the effects of the songs in detail (one exception being de Rios and Katz 1975), so the literature on the experiential impact / lived experience of icaros is scarce.

Literature directly informing the present study includes Luna 2006, Shannon 2002, Bustos' 2008 descriptive phenomenology of the healing effects of icaros and her 2016 development of this work, along with Demange's unpublished thesis (2002).

Bustos 2008's study aimed to 'enhance the psychological understanding of icaros within mestizo shamanism' (Bustos 2008 p7). She carried out pilot studies at Takiwasi and recruited participants at a healing centre in the province of Huanuco, Peru. Participants, all of whom had extensive experience of ATM and ayahuasca, were selected on the basis of having experienced an icaro as 'intensely healing'; all re-listened to the icaros before undertaking interviews.

Bustos's study describes participants' experiences of 'intense of healing with an icaro' during ceremony (p78), finding that intense experiences of healing were characterised at a moment of 'increased focus and expectation to the point of surrender into full and exclusive engagement in listening and inner experience' (p78) leading to a state whereby

'Singing and inner experience were apprehended as unfolding in perfect simultaneity and syntony with each other, and intimately addressing an innermost felt healing need' (p78)

Another feature of the intensely healing experiences reported was that 'the singing provided a sense of intimate support and empathetic connection with the healer' (p78) and that it coincided with a 'deep and necessary release of core unhealthy conditions' p78, leaving participants 'restored back to a sense of expanded connection with themselves' (p79)

Whilst the aims of this study are similar to Bustos 2008 its methodology differs. Bustos' work is a descriptive phenomenology aiming to explore 'intensely healing experiences' with an icaro, whereas this study uses IPA and aims to focus closely on the songs as therapeutic tools, with reference to the MT literature; to examine not only the phenomenological / perceptual experience of the songs, but also to elucidate therapeutically-significant aspects of participant responses and behaviours in relation to the songs.

Epistemology and methods

This research was motivated largely by my own strong healing experiences with icaros during rituals of TAM in contexts outside of Takiwasi, experiences which inspired not only an interest in the therapeutic function of icaros within TAM but also contributed to flexibly developing orientations towards South American indigenous cosmologies and spirituality, whilst retaining critically realist roots in Western modes of thought.

The project therefore reflects an epistemology influenced equally by a critical realism which 'lets us speak of one world that has multiple realities' (Schillbrack 2014 p172) and my own developing belief systems around spiritual or non-material realities that exist and can be interacted with. It therefore takes a transcultural position aiming to allow for 'dialogic pluralism' (Stige 2002 p249) between culturally situated modes of thought, spiritual and cosmological orientations.

This is an IPA study based in the model of Smith Flowers & Larkin (2009), leaning towards a mixed-methods approach as discussed by Mayoh (2015). The study is also interdisciplinary, aiming to situate itself between music therapy, medical ethnomusicology, anthropological studies of Amazonian music and culture, psychology of music, transcultural / transpersonal psychology and psychedelic science and medicine. For this reason, while the methods and analysis are qualitative, on a meta-level the organisation of the data observes and pays respect to positivist psychological categorisations of experience in order to better facilitate interdisciplinary communication.

Eligible participants were adults over the age of 18 with no formal psychiatric diagnosis. Purposive sampling was used and participants were recruited from a single group of participants attending a 12 day 'seminar' at the Takiwasi centre. This was a retreat for French-speakers involving psychological input (meetings with a therapist) group discussions & seminars, three ceremonies with ayahuasca, other treatments with ATM, and a 'dieta'; a period of seclusion spent deeper in the jungle with restricted diet aimed at allowing for personal introspection and psychological processing of the traditional healing ceremonies.

The research was presented to the group on their day of arrival at Takiwasi, a publicity flier (appendix 7) distributed and all members of the group were given the opportunity to read information sheets (appendix 9) sign-up, and give consent (appendix 9). Of 10 initial sign-ups, 7 attended interviews, and 1 was excluded from the study having not participated in the healing session ('night X') due to Takiwasi's restrictions on participation in ceremonies using ayahuasca, leaving a final sample size of 6.

Semi-structured interviews (duration: 34 - 53 minutes) were conducted over a period of 2 consecutive days between 36 and 58 hours after the end of the first traditional medicine ceremony of the retreat programme in March 2018. Four interviews were conducted in French, and, with conversationally fluent English speakers, two in English.

The interview consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit experiences of the songs heard during the ceremony. Questions addressed emotional and perceptual, somatic & spiritual experiences related to songs and the auditory environment, issues relating to memory, semantics / understanding of lyrics.

Interviews were anonymised, transcribed verbatim and then transcript data relating directly to the experience of songs on night X was highlighted. This song-related data was extracted each quote was coded exhaustively with themes and categories. These code tags were compiled into complete sets of codes for each participant supported by narrative transcript summaries (appendix 12) Category tags were colour coded by participant and compiled into a master-list of categories, which were then iteratively arranged and rearranged in order to develop conceptual structures to the data. Given the close conceptual domains of the data, which related to interconnected experiences of mind-body-

spirit this process was complex. To make sense of the data an initial two-way division was made into categories of 'primary experiences' of songs and 'analytic responses' to songs, primary experiences being defined as broadly physiologically perceptual and 'analytic experiences' as broadly higher-level interpretative responses to the songs. This 2-way division of data corresponded roughly to Smith et al's categories delineating 4 layers of the phenomenological experience:

Layers 1 & 2: 'unselfconscious' or 'pre-reflective reflexivity' (level 1) and lightly 'glancing' reflexivity (level 2)

Layers 3 & 4: 'attentive reflection' and 'making sense' (level 3), and deliberate, controlled ('phenomenological') reflection (level 4). (Smith Flower & Larkin 2009 p189)

Master tables of data extracts were drawn up under these two domains of 'primary' and 'analytic' experience. Later these two distinct orderings of the data were integrated into a single master table showing 4 meta-categories of 'primary experience', (A – D) and related 'analytic' phenomenological master themes and sub-themes numbered 1-8 (appendix 15). The presentation of the analysis and discussion demonstrate an attempt to integrate these two parallel processes of structuring the data.

Results

Participant demographic summary

Age		Social class		Religion	
30-40	1	'OK' / 'Normal'	2	Christian	2
40-50	1	Middle class	2	Catholic	2
50-60	3	'Well-off'	2	'Brought up as Catholic'	1
Undeclared	1			Atheist	1
Gender		Relationship status		Profession	
Female	1	Single	3	Holistic health	1
Male	5	Married / in a relationship	3	Skilled trades	1
				Medicine	1
				Psychotherapy	1
Ethnicity		Children		Business management	1
Caucasian	5	Yes	2	Special education	1
African origins	1	No	4		

Reasons given for attending the retreat were as follows:

- To work on relationship issues (Uli)
- To work on my ego / being more tolerant (Sam)
- To improve or make changes in my life (Liz)
- For help with a spiritual problem (2 people) (Colin and Wesley)
- 'recharging my batteries' and 'deep cleansing' (Wesley)
- To work on a family problem / on my personal & emotional life (Hubert)

Two participants were motivated by 'spiritual problems' they wished to address. These were described as being troubled by the 'parasitic' presence of snakes at night; and wanting help / insight relating to an 'attack from a sorcerer'.

Participants had varying degrees of previous experience of Amazonian Traditional Medicine at Takiwasi. Four of the participants had previously attended the centre between 2 and 9 times and had existing familiarity with many of the icaros used in the ceremony, some owned CDs of Takiwasi icaros. These participants knew many of the songs by heart and frequently compared their experience on night X to previous sessions at Takiwasi.

Icaros experienced at Takiwasi

The repertoire of icaros are sung at Takiwasi includes songs received from shamans of the region and icaros received by the healers working at the centre; including songs in French. With some exceptions, most participants were able to clearly recall strong experiences taking place during the singing of the icaros on night X, however it was more difficult to recall the specific song/s being sung at the time of the experience. This was likely due in part to the 36 to 58 hours of elapsed time between the end of the ceremony and the interviews, and to the large number of songs sung on the night. Two participants (Liz and Colin) were hearing the songs for the first time. At times during interviews participants weren't

able to recall the lyrics of songs they wished to refer to, but were able to hum or whistle a melody to aid identification.

A majority of participants expressed a liking for the songs in general, a few had preferences for some in particular, and more than one mentioned listening to recordings of the songs in their daily lives. Songs most often named by participants were: Abrete Corazon (4/6); Je me suis promene dans les Trefonds (3/6); Le couer sait bien tout ca (2/6) Cancion para llamar la mareacion (2/6).

Analysis

Meta-category A: Psycho-physical and psycho-emotional experiences

1. Making space for healing and transformation

1.1. Helping to release negative energy & process emotions

All participants described ways in which the songs helped them with emotional processing and the release of negative energy or emotions. Often this emotional processing was described physically, and for 3 of the participants this was also connected to the emetic effects of the ayahuasca. For Hubert when the song 'appeared', negative emotions which were located in the body 'melted' leaving him in a state of joy:

'Before the song, maybe I had some sadness here and some anger there. The song appears, these sensations melt, and the body starts to feel a joy which of course translates to the mind, but it starts with the body'

He describes 'working' on physical sensations of sadness located in his back and heart; during one song this sadness disappeared. For Hubert the succession of different songs seemed to bring about successive experiences of embodied states & emotions as part of a dynamic process

'certain songs had an effect... they brought about a physical joy; others brought a sense of sweetness, others gave rise to a sense of power, will, mental force, but it was all on a physical level'.

Wesley said that some songs helped him 'get rid of bad energy' and as getting rid of 'old demons', which he said could be equated with negative emotions. Sam described the songs helping him to release 'knots' of stored emotion which rose up the body to be released.

1.2 Soothing and calming

More than half of the participants experienced some of the songs as being emotionally soothing, calming, consoling or inducing a feeling of peace. Hubert describes some songs as having an effect that was 'stronger than Valium'; saying that certain songs 'soothe the body and mind, but first the song consoles the emotions; it's almost instantaneous'.

Colin experienced the songs addressing an agitated 'part of himself' which he described as being 'not completely himself' and in some way 'unknown' to him. He described this experience as being like being stuck in a room with an agitated animal; the songs came to 'calm and appease' this part of himself and to stop it from being so agitated.

Sam says that some songs 'are to quiet down [...] everybody, and you can feel that, and it quiets you down as well', whilst for Liz the songs sung by the women were 'like soothing mothers'.

‘for the women’s songs I felt I was being taken care of, it was like “don’t worry, don’t worry we are there for you”.

1.3 Being moved to tears

Both Colin and Hubert were moved to tears during certain songs. They said these were not tears of sadness; for Colin they were ‘tears of gratitude’, and for Hubert ‘tears of emotion’. For Colin this happened during the French songs that he felt had a quality of tenderness which moved him – he states that the tears came because he felt a sense of ‘recognition’ from the healer and that the gratitude arose because he felt that someone was ‘coming to find’ and help him. He also describes in the ‘gentler’ / ‘softer’ songs, feeling a kind of unconditional acceptance that was very moving for him as he found it to be an invitation to ‘open his heart and stop judging’.

Hubert’s experience of being moved to tears also came during a French song; ‘Je me suis promene dans les trefonds’ and seemed to be related to the content of the lyrics, which describe walking through subterranean depths and finding the soul.

1.4 Feeling ‘supported’, ‘held’, ‘accommodated’ and ‘protected’

Colin’s experience in relation to certain songs was of reassurance, recognition and support. The songs, in conjunction with a psychedelic perception which seemed to have profound psychological significance for him (2.4) created a sense of security with a ‘very masculine’ aspect;

‘it was the security of someone who says “stay upright, we’re with you and you can lean on us but you have to support yourself [as well]; don’t let yourself go”

Colin described the importance of a kind of ‘unconditional sense of acceptance’ in the songs of one singer, and at another moment felt that the songs ‘held his hand’ so that he didn’t feel alone. Later, speaking about the sometimes disorderly / unpredictable auditory environment of the ceremony (including of sounds of vomiting, vocalisations and other noises), he said that

‘the songs accommodated all of it, they carried all of it; I felt....yes, the songs protected us from all mishaps that could have happened’.

Liz, speaking about the songs of the female curandero’s said ‘for the women’s song I felt I was being taken care of, it was like “don’t worry, don’t worry we are there for you” it was more like being held’, she also described them as being like lullabies.

Meta category B: Non-ordinary experience

2.Responding to altered perceptions

2.1 Songs entering / being directed to different parts of the body:

Three of the participants described experiences of the songs entering their body; an experience which dovetails with curanderos’ understanding of how they use the songs for healing; Jacques describes the songs as ‘energetic’ structures which interact with the participants ‘energetic body’, to effect healing. Uli, particularly during Jacques’ songs, had the experience of songs ‘speaking’ to different parts of the body..

‘I had the impression [...] that sometimes they were speaking to me here, sometimes they were speaking to me there, sometimes there [...] as if the songs were being sent to different

places depending on their vibration [*humming to indicate pitch*] they went downwards or more into the stomach, or more into the heart' (Uli)

Hubert experienced the songs 'incarnating' in the body, and during Jacques' songs, Liz, had an experience of something 'mysterious' entering the body along with the songs:

'something was mysterious and had an implied meaning or an implied power that.. was getting into me, that I was not rejecting and...and that would be meaningful later'

During one song which Uli found particularly powerful this sense of the songs entering the body led to an experience of letting go (see also 5.5).

'at a certain moment.... it's like they penetrate you, and you... if they go into your heart you can go and hide in your hand, or if they go into your stomach you can go and hide in your head... but when he sings that song I feel like there's no where I can go and hide so I have to... so [...] I have to just let go. It's like they permeate **everything** 'it's so... too much that it takes you somewhere else'.

He clarified that this was a 'positive thing'.

2.2 Movements of songs

Both Liz and Uli felt that Jacques' songs in particular descended from above; whilst Sam experienced the gentler womens' songs as 'sneaking' around him 'like a snake' allowing him to 'release some other things which cannot be released by the ones which are very intense'.

2.3 Auditory-to-visual synaesthesia (&-C's)

Participants described experiences of auditory-to-visual synaesthesia in line with descriptions given by Shanon (2011). For Liz and Sam auditory-to visual synesthetic effects corresponded with the changing of the songs:

'each time it was a new song I had an outburst of a new colour and each time very, um not just a single colour, more a kind of theme, a colourful theme' which consisted of 'moving dancing colours'.

The colours Liz saw varied according to who was singing:

'the **blue** colours came with...songs from the Indian men er.... And the **yellow** and more **earth colours** were coming from Jacques' songs,[...] and the **red** and **pinks** were coming from the women' (Liz)

Liz had heard about synaesthesia before but was experiencing it for the first time, this experience was 'fabulous' and 'very beautiful' to her, inducing a feeling that was:

'more than enjoyment; like a bewilderment – you know, marvelling'

Sam said that his visions (which often consisted of little 'animals' or 'monkeys' coming 'to clean me everywhere') changed with the song, but also with his 'state of mind' and when he vomited.

Hubert described the songs as being like midwives 'giving birth to' visualisations which were 'full of complicated twisted forms' that were 'bizarre, extraordinary -a bit like Salvador Dali'. He draws a pejorative analogy between these visualisations and 'Hollywood' or 'Starwars', implying that there was something showy or empty about these images. He believed that these 'twisted' visualisations were perhaps a representation of 'something a bit twisted' in himself that needed healing, that could

have represented 'his adolescence' or his 'way of thinking'. They were, he believed, 'symbolic representations' showing him 'a worry, a torment, problem, a fear of some kind'.

In a previous experiences at Takiwasi in 2011 he had found his visualisations 'fabulous' but this time he felt that they were 'bullshit' and wanted to get rid of them; nonetheless, he said that these images helped him, and he adopted a strategy of accommodating their presence.

'I accommodated it...it made me scared or made me angry, etc, and so I accommodated the fear, the anger associated with this image and then.... [...] assisted by the songs... these images disappeared' (Hubert)

In doing this he was able to move through the experience in a way which signified healing of these issues.

2.4 Symbolic / archetypal representations

Colin, a first-timer to ATM, came to Takiwasi for help with what he described as a 'spiritual problem' of a parasitic presence of snakes which he experienced troubling him at night time. He had already sought help for this problem through exorcists in his home country, and through chanting Vedic mantras. Colin experienced an entheogenic phenomenon during a 'purga' treatment before night X.

'it was a kind of very strong green vine that curled around my spine and kept me upright' (Colin)

To him this had multi-layered significance; he described himself as someone who often felt (physically) 'twisted' and so this presence helping him to sit upright was welcome. During night X the experience of the vine continued, telling him 'take repossession of your territory'. During one healer's songs in particular, a 'kind of green ball' also placed itself in his spine, telling him that he was 'at home', and to 'stay there'. He found these experiences 'supportive' in the sense of someone who says

"stay upright, we're with you and you can lean on us but you have to support yourself; don't let yourself go" (Colin)

By staying calm and 'in a state of prayer' and holding on to the songs 'like Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth', he was able to navigate through these experiences without feeling alone.

2.5 Difficult experiences, adverse reactions

Not all songs were experienced positively; L had an adverse response to some of the songs of the local Peruvian curanderos. The experience for her was unpleasant; 'like chainsaws', and she wanted it to stop.

'as if a tool was trying to make it's way into me [...] it's something that was ...persistant and resistant in a disagreeable way' (Liz)

She also associated the songs of the local curanderos as carrying a meaning which she wasn't yet ready to receive. Uli at one point felt sad having 'realised terrible things about himself'.

Wesley describes an experience at times in which 'the songs get multiplied tenfold' and he goes through spiritual battles which can be frightening.

'The songs are multiplied, so.. because you're going to go through a battle, it's going to be something really terrible...[...] when I'm confronted by bad spirits, they can be represented by big black snakes' (Wesley)

As the participant with most previous experience of TAM he had a ready approach for dealing with such experiences (see 6.3)

Meta-category C. Cognitive-psychological experience and beyond

Participants described a range of cognitive level-experiences of the songs, including anticipating the effects of known songs, and analysing or trying to understand the meanings of words in Spanish or Quechua. They also expressed preference for certain songs. Patterns of cognitive experience in relation to songs, which included psychological 'stances' or 'approaches' to facing the experience were categorised as follows:

3. Songs as orientators and mediators

3.1 (Re-)orientating oneself through the songs

Almost every participant described the songs as being 'guides', or as 'guidance' and explained ways in which they used songs to orientate them either experientially or physically. According to Sam the songs are

'a guide when you get lost [...] you listen to the songs, you just catch them and they bring you where.... where you need to go, like inside your body, it's very introspective' (Sam)

Uli said that 'the songs guide the mind to this or that place, to this or that thing'. Wesley described the process of refocussing his attention on the songs as leading him back to an embodied state; as a more experienced participant this seemed to be a habitual approach for him which particularly helped him during difficult moments.

'I come straight back, [...] listen to the song, bring myself back to the song, ... because in the songs there are moments which help you [...] to regain a certain serenity, to find yourself back in your body' (Wesley)

Liz and Hubert both described the action of focussing on the songs as helping them to sit upright during the night. Liz, focussing on the songs

'felt that I could be more awake, more **present**, and again more **straight**, so not not in a collapsing body (Liz)

4. Sense-making through metaphor

Many metaphors were used, particularly by one participant, to describe the songs, their action, and participants' means of relating to them. The most commonly used metaphor (used by almost all participants) was that of 'holding on' 'grasping' 'grabbing' or 'attaching themselves to' the songs

The particularly expressive range of metaphors and analogies used by Hubert to explain his conceptions of how the songs functioned demonstrated that he was going through his own nuanced process of sense-making in relation to the effects of the songs, in keeping with Bornstein's idea that metaphors 'enable us to construct cohesive personal narratives that give meaning to past and present experience' (2011 p184)

Both Hubert and Liz described the songs as being like 'life rings'; suggesting they saved them from some kind of danger. Many of Hubert's other metaphors for the songs also carried nuances of

guidance, either personal or impersonal. They were 'well-meaning friends', 'teachers who take you by the hand' and in whom 'you have to trust'. They were also 'a compass'.

5. Trusting and letting go

Several participants experienced a sense of 'letting go' during the songs. This was described in different ways and for different individuals seemed to include elements of letting go on different levels of experience. Colin's experience of 'letting go' happened during the songs of one female healer, and went along with what seemed to be involuntary movements.

'every time they [F's songs] gave me confidence, also the sense that I didn't have to hold on, that I could stop controlling something' (Colin)

For Uli, the sense of letting go was in relation to the experience of one song which he felt went 'to the deepest parts of the mind, of the body' (see 2.1). It seemed that this experience was so intense, it led to a sense of release, and him being 'taken somewhere else'

'I just have to say, OK, **let go**, you know? It's like they go into everything' (Uli)

These experiences of 'letting go', either physically or mentally indicated a releasing of some kind of unwanted or restrictive sense of 'holding', contrasting with the frequently described experience of 'holding on' to the songs for guidance or orientation discussed in 4.

5.1 Stopping the thoughts

Both L and U1 had experiences where songs played a role in stopping their thought processes; this was a desired outcome for both of them. For L, the act of focussing on the songs helped her to stop ruminative thoughts (which described as 'repeated negative beliefs').

'in a way I think holding onto the songs was like "**shut up**" [M: uhhuh- to your mind?] yes yeah yeah [M mental... part] yeah it was really stopping mind and focussing my **mind** on the **songs** so that in the meantime it was not nurturing a kind of negative spirit in me'

For Uli, J's songs in particular 'allowed him to let go of [his] thoughts'. During the first part of night X he was 'thinking about stuff', and later, when the 'ayahuasca was really working' he explained that:

'it's like the songs invade me... and so I don't think any more because I'm... it's as if the song pushed out the thoughts'

6. Inclinations towards the unseen

The experience of the songs interacted with participants' religious and spiritual lives and belief systems in ways that had personal significance for them. Spiritual, religious, mysterious or metaphysical experiences were described by most participants.

6.1. coming from a mysterious or divine source

For Liz, Jacque's songs seemed emanate from a remote non-wordly origin; it was 'like it was coming from an angel'.

'like they are coming from another realm... very far away'.

This place was both 'further away' and 'higher'. During Jacque's songs she felt 'a peace which was more... spiritual than emotional' (Liz)

6.2 Collective energy vs individual / introspective nature of the experience

Colin and Wesley described a positive experience of collectivity and connection with other people in the group. W says: 'there's also this collective energy... so um, there are moments when you can feel... you can feel connected'; for him this connection is felt through the songs

'in the songs it's also a collective energy'

Colin appreciated the group aspect of the healing experience:

'I had the impression that we were all together, all in the process of getting free of what was making us ill'.

Collective experiences contrasted with an emphasis placed by Sam and Wesley on the importance of an individual / introspective aspect to the experience; Sam says that the songs 'bring you where... where you need to go, [mhm] like **inside** your body, it's very introspective' Wesley, as well as noting this sense of collectivity, also found the individual aspect of the experience valuable:

'there are moments when you can go through things individually as well, so uh..it depends on the song' (Wesley)

He states that at some moments he manages 'not to listen to the others any more [...] to be with myself'.

6.3 Being visited by / interacting with personal deities

'That song for me is feeling the presence of the holy spirit, it's feeling the presence of Christ' (Wesley)

Wesley, a practising Catholic, mentioned one song during which he was visited by spiritual presences. In ceremonies during difficult moments such as that described in (2.4) he calls for spiritual support or protection; either outwardly from the facilitators or in the form of Christ. He finds support available from a curandero or via a direct experience of or visitation from his religious deity

'sometimes it also happens that I'll say 'Lord', because I'm a practicing Christian... "Lord help me" and at that moment I saw that he came and put his hand on my shoulder like that and he said to me "don't worry, I'm with you, don't be scared" (Wesley)

6.4 Metaphysical insights from the auditory environment

For Hubert, this change in auditory perception inspired metaphysical insights. In describing the auditory environment he comments on a sense of awe and slight intimidation; 'a fear related to the fact that you realise that there's a harmony; that there's a grand design'. He experienced the sounds and songs as all being addressed to him, specifically in order to heal him personally. Furthermore, he felt that everyone was having this same experience; as if the sounds heard by everyone would 'reveal something proper' to the heart of each individual. Sam felt good; 'at home' amongst the sounds of nature and for Ulric it was 'wonderful' to hear the 'life that's all around'. The sounds of nature gave him a mental and physical 'sense of belonging; the feeling of being alive and of belonging to life'.

6.5 A sense of universal, non-language dependent significance

'something was mysterious and had an implied meaning or an implied power [...] that.. would be meaningful later' (Liz)

All participants described a sense in which the songs had an impact unrelated to the understanding of the words; Sam and Hubert linked this to metaphysical concepts and beliefs. Colin compared this to watching a sub-titled film; in which 'things happen in the images and in the language that you don't understand, but at the same time there's a truth there that you understand'.

Liz says that 'there was something universal that was not related to language' in the songs. Sam also used the word 'universal', saying 'the language is not important. [uhuh] What is important is that it touch[es] you inside, like... it's universal'. He also described how he believes that something mysterious happens during the healing process at Takiwasi more generally:

'You cannot understand what is happening here, it's something which is....way... it's, the intelligence is way [...] above what everybody can understand'

Wesley says that while you might have 'a bit more sensitivity' during the French songs, you can also have 'very strong' experiences during songs in which you 'understand nothing at all'. Hubert told me that he

'knows that things happen; effects happen even beyond the understanding of the songs; so even the songs in Quechua – even if I don't know what they're saying, I know they will work anyway'.

To him this was as if 'my mind didn't understand Quechua but my soul understood it. So I trust in that'. Liz described being touched by certain songs (also French ones) before she 'understood the words'.

Discussion & conclusion

7. Psychotherapeutic, archetypal and transpersonal considerations

The mythical symbolism of Amazonian cosmologies is brimming with potentially transcultural and archetypal meaning. There are many parallel as well as disparate symbolic resonances between Amazonian indigenous cosmology and Western psychotherapy; creating a rich ground for symbolic and archetypal interpretation. There is room for both culturally-situated and transcultural analysis of songs in relation to individual healing experience in this regard. In this study, Colin's experience

incorporating snakes, a green vine and Ariadne's thread, perhaps lends itself most to an archetypal or transpersonal analysis.

Snakes are potent symbols in Western psychotherapeutic and religious lineages as well as in the Amazon, where the snake is often seen as representing of the spirit of ayahuasca. Antoniou (2010) calls the snake an 'ideal symbol of healing, wisdom, immortality, rejuvenation, love, sensuality, sin, and death' (p217), whilst the symbol of the rod and the serpent is a symbol of healing (ibid). The **green coiled vine** can be interpreted as the twisted form of the ayahuasca vine itself. One possible interpretation of Colin's experience is in relation to possession of kundalini or sexual energy; his wish to be freed of the parasitic snakes representing disowned sexual energy or life-force, is partly met when the green vine (i.e. the ayahuasca, revealing itself in plant spirit form) tells him to 'take possession of his territory'; to be present in his body.

Ariadne's thread

This image of hanging on to the songs 'like Ariadne's thread' has mythical, archetypal resonance; the thread of the songs allowing Colin to navigate his way away from an implied danger of the minotaur (located perhaps simultaneously in the subconscious and in the ASC) in the direction of freedom.

'I had to stay really calm [...] I held on to the songs, as if it was a vine [...] also like it was a thread, like Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth' (Colin)

The often-mentioned notion of the songs as 'guides' could be interpreted shamanically or within a Western paradigm; in shamanic terms, these guides leading the participant (or initiate) across unknown terrain towards access to spiritual wisdom and initiation, or in a Western way in relation to mentorship, or the opportunities for personal development and growth. Holding on to and being guided by the songs helped participants find their way through an experience which was not always easy but which promised to lead towards insight and transformation.

Participants' 'holding on', 'hanging on' or 'attaching themselves' to the songs as a means of orientating themselves, along with the importance placed on a sense of unconditional acceptance from the healers can readily be interpreted in relation to **attachment theory** (Bowlby 1977) and the psychotherapeutic concept of **containment**. The perceived benevolent intention of the curanderos seemed to be an important factor in participants achieving a state of trust and readiness for healing, with the healers' understanding, recognition, and compassion, conveyed or transmitted via the songs and their physical presence, were noted as being significant. Colin felt that the songs 'held him by the hand' a description which brings strong resonances of childhood. For Liz, who shared that 'the mother dimension is.... far from comfortable', the women's songs were like 'soothing mothers', or like lullabies, and she felt emotional sharing that her experience of some of these songs was 'like... what I wish I had had as a mothering experience'. Hanging on to the songs reflects this implicit sense of trust in (and attachment to) the individuals responsible for the participants' overall psychological and physical wellbeing during the retreat.

8. Impact of culture and previous experience

Participants' cultural background and varying degrees of previous experience of TAM / healing retreats at Takiwasi seemed to influence their experiences and the ways they made sense of the effects of the songs. Metaphors, cultural and mythical referents used for explaining experiences reflected the participant's culturally-situated worldview and their responses indicated changing or developing orientations of openness towards indigenous Amazonian cosmologies of healing.

Some participants seemed already to have been influenced by Amazonian worldviews and by their experience at Takiwasi, whereas for others these ideas were novel and interesting. The participant who had had the most previous experience at Takiwasi shared understandings and beliefs that seemed closely aligned with an indigenous perspective, referring to the importance of the songs' role in helping to gain access to an 'invisible world' or the 'world of the spirits' revealing a belief that for him, as within Amazonian cosmologies, the 'unseen realm' is where access to healing lies. There are many possible connections to be explored between indigenous understandings of songs, plants and ritual granting access this 'invisible world' or shamanic realm, and a scientific approach towards investigating the musical experiences of the ASCs and their relation to personal healing experiences.

Hubert's interpretation of the songs functioning as an 'intercession' between the curandero and participant points towards a psycho-emotional and spiritual exchange or transmission which resonates with Amazonian indigenous understandings of the role of the shaman bringing knowledge and healing from the spiritual world, as well as with.

'it's an interaction which you feel very deeply between the curanderos and the patients. It's an intercession, it's a connection [...] it's important; you feel the benevolent intention of the [healers], who via the songs, through their voices, through... their intonation, give their affection and their love... it happens through the songs'

Participants' lived experiences of visions changing with the song (2.3), and of songs entering the body (2.1) dovetails with the indigenous understanding of the songs as possessing power, (Luna 2006, Bustos 2008) and as having the capacity to affect and guide the ceremonial experience and content of the visions (Moreno 1995) opening up more questions.

Limitations

Along with taking a position of inter- or trans-cultural interdisciplinarity goes the needs for attempting to answer a question posed by Stige 2002: 'how can we negotiate between claims on universal mechanisms on one side and the total relativism of radical local meaning perspectives on the other?' (p239). This study does not claim to have fully articulated between the very disparate culturally-situated modes of thought, musical meanings, aetiologies of health and illness and cosmologies located between the Amazon basin and the Western roots of music therapy, and important omissions have surely been made. Smith et al site the main material of an IPA as being located at **level 3** – attentive reflection and making sense (2009 page 189) Due to the need to coherently structure a large amount of data on diverse levels of experience (including ASCs) the extent to which this qualitative aim of an IPA methodology has been fulfilled may be limited. More data was collected than could be interpreted; for this reason potentially illuminating data from curandero interviews had to be omitted. Due to time and word constraints it hasn't been possible to consider in detail the the full interdisciplinary implications of the conjunction between the songs and the ASC and explore the relevance for processes of healing which appear to be indicated on biophysical as well as psychological levels. Finally, because of a desire to pitch this study towards a Western audience, undoubtedly many nuances of meaning and significance from the Amazonian indigenous perspective have been left out.

However, I think preliminary conclusions can be drawn which hope to shed light on this musical healing tradition, and begin to translate the knowledge for relevance to contemporary music therapy and point towards fruitful future directions of enquiry.

Preliminary conclusions

- Songs guided the experience of the ceremony and served as an orientating point of focus which helped participants navigate unpredictable and sometimes disorientating experiences
- Songs induced personally significant and spiritual, religious or metaphysical experiences
- Healing experiences in relation to songs were highly individualised and related to personal psychological history
- An implicit sense of trust in the benevolent healing intention of the curandero seemed important in experiences of healing
- Qualities of song itself as well as of the voice and of the 'energy' of the person singing impacted on the experiences of healing
- Participants considered the songs 'essential' and 'fundamental' in the experience of the traditional healing ceremony
- Many participants' experiences of the action of songs seemed to dovetail with Amazonian beliefs about how the songs function in a healing capacity (for example by entering the body, imparting a certain power (2.1))
- Understanding of the role / impact of the songs was expressed and conceived in culturally-situated ways
- Songs were experienced to be acting as powerful mediators of therapeutic interaction between curandero and participant, impacting individuals in bio-psycho-physical ways

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