

# **Synergism between Catholicism and Indigenous Spirituality within the Drug Addiction Rehabilitation Program of Takiwasi, A Therapeutic Community in the Peruvian High-Amazon<sup>1</sup>**

*Synergie entre le catholicisme et la spiritualité autochtone dans le programme de réhabilitation de la toxicomanie de Takiwasi, une communauté thérapeutique en haute Amazonie péruvienne*

Authors: Alberto Dubbini<sup>1</sup>, Marco Gallizioli<sup>2</sup>, Fabio Friso<sup>3</sup>, Jaime Torres<sup>3</sup>, Jacques Mabit<sup>3</sup>, Matteo Politi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Liceo Scientifico Luigi di Savoia, Ancona, Italy.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Religious Science Italo Mancini, Urbino, Italy.

<sup>3</sup> Center for the rehabilitation of drug addicts and research on traditional medicines, Takiwasi, Tarapoto, Peru.

## **ABSTRACT**

The association between spirituality and medicine is unfolding as a research theme that may have increasing practical implications in healthcare systems. Both, spiritual and scientific dimensions are present within the treatment protocol for addiction applied at the Takiwasi Center, a pioneer therapeutic community that combines western approaches, including psychotherapy, biomedicine, and Catholic practices, with traditional Amazonian medicine. Through a series of open-ended and semi-structured interviews conducted on nine workers of the center during fieldwork research and comparison with the information obtained from literature review, the present article aims at testing the existence of an effective synergy between Catholic religiosity and indigenous-mestizo spirituality within the

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therapeutic process performed at the Takiwasi Center and puts in evidence some stimulating and problematic issues that arise from this synergy.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Spirituality, Spirits Encounter, Plant Medicine, Drug Addiction, Interfaith Dialogue, Ontological Turn

## **RÉSUMÉ**

L'association entre spiritualité et médecine se développe aujourd'hui comme un thème de recherche pouvant avoir des implications pratiques croissantes dans les systèmes de santé. Le protocole de traitement de la toxicomanie appliqué au centre Takiwasi, une communauté thérapeutique pionnière qui mélange des approches occidentales, y compris la psychothérapie, la biomédecine et les pratiques catholiques, avec la médecine traditionnelle amazonienne, intègre à la fois des dimensions spirituelles et scientifiques. En combinant des données de la littérature et une série d'entretiens ouverts et semi-structurés menés auprès de 9 travailleurs du centre au cours d'une recherche sur le terrain, le présent article vise à tester l'existence d'une véritable synergie entre la religiosité catholique et la spiritualité métisse et autochtone au sein du processus thérapeutique mené au centre Takiwasi et met en évidence certains sujets stimulants et problématiques qui découlent de cette synergie.

**Mots-clés:** spiritualité autochtone, rencontre avec esprits, phytothérapie, toxicomanie, dialogue interreligieux, tournant ontologique

## **INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

The Takiwasi Center is a therapeutic community founded in 1992 in Tarapoto, San Martin region, Peruvian High-Amazon, and is recognized by the Peruvian Ministry of Health. Takiwasi has been working for over 25 years in the treatment of people with Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) and mental

health problems through the use of Traditional Amazonian Medicine (TAM), combined with Western psychotherapy and classic biomedical monitoring (Politi et al., 2018). Western therapeutic methods include individual psychotherapy (such as Gestalt or Analytic therapy) and group psychotherapy (e.g., relapse prevention, psychodrama, etc.), milieu therapy, and occupational therapy. Takiwasi was the first clinical institution in the world to apply TAM to SUDs (Berlowitz et al., 2018). The research question of this article consists firstly in testing the existence of an effective synergy between Catholic religiosity and indigenous-mestizo spirituality within the therapeutic process performed at the Takiwasi Center, and secondly to explore the themes that may arise from this synergy.

Contact between indigenous peoples and the Catholicism in the San Martin region has been going on for more than 4 centuries. This interaction started in the second half of the sixteenth century with the attempt by Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries to Christianize the Huallaga and Ucayali basins by using the Quechua language. Over the centuries, Christian missionaries have come in succession, finding an ever changing and today very distant reality from the one encountered by the first Jesuits and Franciscans. In coping with this dramatically changing reality the indigenous and mestizo Amazonian spiritual traditions and the Christian religions in this region have walked along parallel and related pathways. Nowadays, in the Takiwasi Center, their stories seem to have found a special meeting place and a synergy worthy of discussion. In this article we will also try to verify, analyze, and understand the consequences of this synergy that could lead to further research and debate.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The present article is based on fieldwork research performed by the first author who visited the Takiwasi Center during July 2018. An analysis of the literature published over the last two decades regarding the activities of the Takiwasi Center, including direct testimonies collected by various researchers, was carried out. The analysis focused on the evaluation of the characteristics and consequences of the synergy, which represents the main object of this research. The information obtained from the literature review was integrated with a series of open-ended and semi-structured interviews conducted on 9

workers of the center, 8 of whom are part of the therapeutic team and work in close contact with the patients, while one is the communications manager. The interviews were conducted using a qualitative method, considered most suitable for this type of research that deals with a topic of extreme complexity and involves people with different life histories and cultural backgrounds. Through the qualitative method we sought to let emerge a perspective as close as possible to the reality of the interviewees, as expressed by their own words. All the interviews were made inside the Takiwasi Center, recorded with an audio instrument and subsequently faithfully transferred to a written text, which was then elaborated and interpreted. For this last operation, an open codification method was used, to develop interpretative schemes that were not decided *a priori*, but rather suggested by the words and contents specifically expressed by the interviewees.

The following sections in which we present the results and discussion are based on a re-elaboration work that combines the interviews performed and the data collected from the literature. Throughout its history the Takiwasi Center has aroused the interest of several researchers who have carried out research work on its therapeutic model and have presented conclusions useful to verify the effective impact of the synergy we are considering in this article. Among the various publications on the subject, we have focused our attention on the contributions by Horák (2013), O'Shaughnessy (2017), Stuveback (2015), Häland (2014) and Carrillo (2009), in addition to the articles produced by Jacques Mabit, Jaime Torres and Rosa Giove of the Takiwasi Center<sup>2</sup>, and two interviews with Mabit (Apffel-Marglin, 2007; Chirinos, 2018). It is necessary to underline the Christian belief and thought of Jacques Mabit, founder and president of the Takiwasi Center. In the numerous texts that Mabit wrote he very rarely referred to Christian themes, but a big part of data collected by the cited authors and as a consequence of the field interviews come from Mabit's words. Moreover, we have considered the testimonies of Cristian Alejandría, a Catholic priest who was formerly responsible for the pastoral care in the center (Alejandría, 2012), and of the Christian orthodox priest Clement Heinisch, who visited Takiwasi in 2003 and described his participation in Ayahuasca ceremonies (Heinisch, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://takiwasi.com/en/publica01.php>

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Traditional Amazonian medicine in Takiwasi's rehabilitation process**

TAM is a set of orally transmitted practices and knowledge that can be grouped under certain common cosmologies and principles that have maintained their distinctive features over the centuries despite all the series of dramatic changes in which indigenous peoples were involved. TAM is considered the main therapeutic resource by the 48% of the population in the Amazon area according to a 2002 ENAHO survey<sup>3</sup>. In some areas, such as in the San Martín region, this percentage can reach up to 80% (Giove, 2012).

TAM is based on a concept of health that exceeds that of a purely corporeal dimension and is dominated by the experience of the relationship with invisible agents (Luna, 1986), belonging to a category of living beings whose identity has been widely translated in the various European languages with the term spirits. They manifest themselves by constantly crossing the boundaries of natural bodies, though they come into contact with human beings through physical and bodily dimensions. A human's life is marked by the disposition of these beings towards them. Therefore, in order to know these rules and be able to relate with spirits in a concretely effective manner, over the centuries the Amazonian populations have learned to receive teachings from some species of plants, called teachers, through the ritualized and consecrated ingestion of their natural extracts.

Teacher plants intake rituals and the set of concepts connected to them constitute a source of knowledge of vital importance for the indigenous and mestizo Amazonian peoples (Luna, 1986). Many of these plants have a psychotropic effect and induce non-ordinary states of consciousness. These powerful effects can put human health at risk if the relationship with the plants doesn't take place according to consecrated and ritually correct methods. Among these plants, there is one that takes a position of

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<sup>3</sup> [https://webinei.inei.gob.pe/anda\\_inei/index.php/catalog/273/study-description](https://webinei.inei.gob.pe/anda_inei/index.php/catalog/273/study-description)

central importance for over seventy ethnic groups of the Amazon basin, scattered in a vast area that goes from Brazil to the northernmost areas of the Colombian Amazon. This is the vine *Banisteriopsis Caapi*, popularly known by the Quechua name of Ayahuasca (Mabit, 2018). The ritual use of the psychoactive brew Ayahuasca and many other medicinal plants derived from TAM knowledge plays a fundamental role in Takiwasi's patient rehabilitation protocol. The other two pillars of the treatment model are the psychotherapeutic accompaniment and the living together in accordance with the general model of therapeutic communities.

### **Worship spaces for the Catholic celebration and prayer**

The fundamental axes of the therapeutic model adopted by the Takiwasi Center do not explicitly include the Christian faith. In fact, the therapeutic approach is not a confessional one and the Christian proposal is an option offered to patients, though it does not constitute part of the obligatory therapeutic process in which they are involved. Likewise, neither the staff nor the participants in the other therapeutic spaces offered by Takiwasi are selected according to religious criteria. Inside Takiwasi's facilities there are a series of places for prayer and statues and images of saints that make precise reference and invitation to the Catholic Christian faith. Such a fact expresses the will of the managers of the therapeutic community to create a symbolic dimension religiously oriented in the Christian sense. Takiwasi's evolution over the years has gone in this direction in part as result of the patients' will. A clear example in this sense is the chapel. Being the main religious space, the chapel is located just a few meters away from the headquarters building. Here a weekly Sunday mass is celebrated for all those who freely want to take part. Generally, there is a mass celebration also on the same day as the weekly Ayahuasca ceremony, just a few hours before the night intake session. The center has the support of a priest appointed by the bishop of Moyobamba who offers his pastoral assistance to the patients and celebrates mass; in his absence Takiwasi's staff might try to find a temporary substitute for mass celebrations.

Other particularly significant places of worship are a simple space for prayer in front of the image of the Virgin of La Puerta (also installed after a patients' vision) and an altar dedicated to St. Martín de

Porres, where one can pray before the painted image of the saint and a cross fixed on the wall. As proof of the Christian devotion of the managers and main healers of the community, a statue of St. Padre Pio (donated by a visitor) is located a few meters from the entrance door of their offices, while inside these we find images of the Crucifix and the Virgin. Christian images are also found in the largest and most important ceremonial space of the center, constituted by the maloca<sup>4</sup> where the Ayahuasca ritual takes place. The wall behind the healers in charge of the ceremony displays three paintings to the participants' view: at the center is the image of the Stabat Mater, i.e. Jesus crucified before Mary and the apostle John<sup>5</sup>; on both sides of this central painting there are two more, on the left the Virgin of Guadalupe and on the right the Archangel Michael.

### **The concrete ritual contexts and actions; their fundamental value**

Almost all the descriptions, ideas and beliefs that constitute the contents of the interviews to be presented below come from the informants' experiences, that emerged in ritual contexts, especially in the Ayahuasca ones. At Takiwasi the ritual is the place where the spiritual experiences dwell. Therefore, the fundamental value of ritually shaped experiences within the therapeutic process constitutes a solid starting point for our research and a sort of hidden thematic category that results from our codification of the interviews and the testimonies presented by the literature. The rituals effectively seem to mark lives of those that take part in them. The patients at Takiwasi are guided through a precise ritual pathway from their first days in the community until their last ones. As we have already considered, Catholic rituals at Takiwasi aren't obligatory. The obligatory rituals can be divided into two broad categories:

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<sup>4</sup> Ceremonial house built according to the model of the indigenous common houses.

<sup>5</sup> This is a copy made by a patient of the famous "Lord of Miracles", a painting that is highly venerated in Peru and is central to local Catholicism.

1. Rituals belonging to indigenous-mestizo traditions, among which the most relevant are those of Ayahuasca, Yawar Panga (*Aristolochia didyma*)<sup>6</sup>, Purgahuasca<sup>7</sup> and the “Dieta”<sup>8</sup>, all of them based on the ritual ingestion of teacher plants;
2. Rituals that don’t belong to any religious or spiritual tradition and we can include in the broadest field of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) practices; these rituals serve to mark the various stages of treatment and are characterized, in comparison with other practices of this kind, by a distinct rite, that is symbolically meaningful, emotionally “harder” and that marks “deeper”.

### **The testimonies from the interviews and the contribution of the literature on the topic**

Based on the interviews conducted in July 2018, through the open codification<sup>9</sup> of the interviewees’ answers, 4 general thematic categories have been identified along with a series of testimonies considered significant for the topic of this research. To these 4 categories we should always add the somehow hidden but fundamental category constituted by the ritual context and action, where the experiences reported by the interviewees take place. The data of the interviews were compared and integrated with those of the academic literature.

#### 1. Christian experience/faith/belief

The argument of the Christian experience has been debated during the field research and in all the literature previously mentioned. According to what we could call “Takiwasi's cosmology” -that is in accordance with the most common local cosmology- God is considered superior to the spiritual and energetic dimension of plants, and to all natural elements such as plants, animals, water, rivers, and mountains created by Him. In this way the plants’ specific power is invoked taking into account God’s

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<sup>6</sup> Emetic plant that operates a deep cleansing of the body of the participants.

<sup>7</sup> Diluted decoction of the vine Ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) prepared according to the tradition of the Awajún people with some Yagé leaves (*Diplopterys cabrerana*) that has a great emetic effect, with secondary visionary or teaching effects.

<sup>8</sup> It consists of a retreat in isolation in the jungle with the ritualized ingestion of the so-called "teacher plants", accompanied by a special diet and strict physical and psychological norms.

<sup>9</sup> Open codification consists of finding conceptual categories in the data through open coding, it is a codification that has not been decided beforehand, but is built on the basis of what emerges from the interviews.

superiority, given that it is God who grants his power to all elements (Horák, 2013). God is granted an agency that at times is contingent on the openness of the individual. Informants describe God's presence and aid as a filling up of energy. Thus, it is important to be open to God, to be able to receive Him.

The informants who spoke of having encountered God in one way or another were completely sure that it was Him and therefore always felt Him as real (Stuveback, 2015). The same *ikaros* (traditional healing chants)<sup>10</sup>, prayers and invocations employed during Ayahuasca ceremonies and other ritual works seek not only the help of the spirits of Amazonian cosmology, but also of the Christian faith, and in many chants we can find invocations to the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. When spirits do appear during ceremonies at Takiwasi, they often do so in the form of Christian characters or angels, but it has been noticed that most of these appearances seem to occur without the individual calling them, as if they knew when help was needed (Stuveback, 2015). Informants have spoken about the relation between God and humans, healers and spirits respectively. The *curandero* (healer) has to believe in the Christian God and to be guided by Him. Healers receive their power from God, with the difference between catholic priests and *curanderos* being the fact that the former receive it directly from Him, the latter get the mediation of the plants. The spirits have to be guided by God as well, but, as for the humans, they may not listen to Him and don't follow His guidance.

Christian informants that operate at the center affirm to have discovered, through their experience at Takiwasi, a complete accordance between their personal Christian life and their exploration of traditional Amazonian medicine and spirituality. The testimonies of the two cited priests that took part in Ayahuasca ceremonies at Takiwasi are very impressive, deeply shaped with Christian symbolism and filled with the living mystical presence of Saints and Divine Persons (Alejandría, 2012; Heinisch, 2011). The intense and deep testimony of the young orthodox priest describes his pathway of crossing and overcoming a personal spiritual crisis through the experience of two weeks at Takiwasi and contact

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<sup>10</sup> The importance of *ikaros* as healing tool is testified also by the name Takiwasi that in Quechua language means "Singing House".

with *curanderos* and teacher plants, specifically through Ayahuasca rituals. The Catholic priest affirms having tested the true degree and depth of his faith through very strong experiences with Ayahuasca. He states to have understood that the human body, the healers, the plants and the whole living creation are an instrument in the hands of Christ.

## 2. The separation and fighting among evil and good spiritual beings

According to the testimonies collected, the complex relation and synergy between Catholicism and indigenous spirituality impressively reveals itself through the experience of the fighting among evil and good spirits that takes place at Takiwasi and during the Ayahuasca ceremonies. Evil and good spirits are respectively felt as negative and positive energies. At Takiwasi addiction is often considered as being related to the presence of non-human entities in the body of the person. A spirit infestation takes place and affects the human body in its 3 dimensions (physical, psychic and spiritual) as long as there is an entrance door, which can be opened by the consumption of drugs, but also by spiritual transgressions of various types, transgenerational inheritance, affective traumas, even physical accidents or diseases. This implies that the patient is not only a passive victim of something that causes him harm, but shows (consciously or not) a collaborative attitude for which he is responsible. To recover his freedom, the patient must abandon the state of innocent victim to assume a leading role in his life. The psychotherapeutic accompaniment provided in Takiwasi serves precisely to detect and heal the open wounds that allowed the infestation in the first place and to adopt life strategies that avoid reopening those doors.

Since in this cosmology, evil and good entities exist, it is necessary to have a system of defense and control over them, and the ritual serves for this purpose. Entering the spiritual world through an Ayahuasca ceremony is a big responsibility and one of the most serious consequences of opening the body to the spiritual dimension under unfavorable conditions is the attachment of negative spiritual entities to the participants (O'Shaughnessy, 2017). The fighting takes place at the same time outside and inside the body of the person, which could be partly or completely possessed, within his bodily

boundaries, by the evil spirit. It is important to detect how and why the latter could get access and possession of the patient. The fighting has a strong perceptual and bodily consistency. With help from the healers, the patient can pacify the demons for the time being. The demons may disappear as suddenly as they appear, though sometimes that disappearance is simply hiding before reappearing. Some patients at Takiwasi wear a rosary around their neck, and may invoke a higher holy power through prayers coupled with intense concentration on religious items, considering that prayers do have an effect of protection against demons. Cases of patients being exorcised during a ceremony have also been observed (Stuveback, 2015). An important issue underlined by several informants which appears somehow in contrast with the testimony cited by Stuveback about a possible pacification of the evil spirits, is the evidence that these spirits can never change their attitude. Informants consider it useless and wrong to negotiate with evil spirits; people have only to expulse them outside their body and life. Only the spirit of the plant responsible for the addiction (for example, the spirit of coca for cocaine) seems to have the disposition to change its attitude toward the patient in relation to the radical change of the latter's behavior toward the former.

According to the general interpretation of addiction at Takiwasi, patients' problems originate from their attitude of desecration toward the spirits of plants and the consequent transgression of the spiritual order established by God. The *curandero* as well can make good or evil use of the plant's power, in the latter case he tries to manipulate it and acts as a sorcerer or *brujo*. A crucial point, according to the informants, is the healer's capability to discern the real attitude of the spirits, as these could deceive the humans by disguising their true intentions, sometimes manifesting themselves through the false image of good persons and even those of Christian Saints. The evil spirits have three essential strategies to weaken the patient's resistance, in the following order: seduction, terror and discouragement. To defend themselves and the patients, healers, as all humans, can call for the presence and the protection of God, the Saints and the good spirits through the proper rituals, prayers and traditional chants like the *ikaros*. According to some informants, the difference between prayers, *ikaros*, religious and spiritual practices on one

hand, and evil magical actions on the other, lies in the fact that the former don't try to force and manipulate powers for egoistic purposes.

Outside of the Ayahuasca ritual context, patients have time to orient themselves towards those demons, to interpret them and refer them to what they represent or manifest, in order to better defend themselves when they once again enter into the Ayahuasca session. The orientation of the patients towards demons is thus refined over time, starting with the first encounter with them in an Ayahuasca ceremony (if not before) and the consequent interpretation of those events outside of it, and back and forth in this way. At Takiwasi a demon possession is primarily considered as lack of spirituality, but is also evaluated in positive terms because it brings to light the possibility of fighting it, meaning exploring the different options relating to individual and psychological strength as well as connections to things more powerful than oneself.

The human being has to expel the evil spirit to recover his/her health and integrity. The two Christian priests testify in different and personal ways their experiences of spiritual fighting. The report of the Catholic priest appears very painful, through a general and non-detailed description of what he calls the meeting with his "dark side" and the vision of "Devil's face" (Alejandría, 2012). The fighting of the young orthodox priest appears very deeply rooted and not less terrific: a hard but firm, detailed and victorious fighting against the temptations of falling in the blasphemy and the denial of Christ (Heinisch, 2011).

According to the reflections of some informants, based on their experience at Takiwasi, the spiritual fighting involves exorcistic practices and actions that in recent times have been disappearing almost completely from the Christian beliefs and rituals; this trend is evaluated in very negative and worrying terms. Giove (2002) underlines the great importance of the inner reconciliation with the world generally experienced by the patients of the center as a consequence of the participation in Ayahuasca rituals. In

agreement with this idea, we find that the celebration of life and the creation, as considered by Mabit and other informants, is a positive form of powerful exorcism.

### 3. The encounter with spirits

Spirits, as a quite general term for the multitude of entities encountered during altered states of consciousness induced by plants, are sometimes clearly distinguishable, sometimes not. The extent of this differentiation and multiplicity is compared to that of the beings of the rainforest. Every element of the creation and the realm of life possesses a specific spirit. Following the different testimonies of the informants it seems unclear if the essence of the spirits should be considered corporeal or incorporeal. The spirits are defined as incorporeal but able to reveal themselves through the physical realm of human experience. Spirits can reveal themselves outside or inside the human body. Generally, human beings cannot recognize their relations with them in an ordinary state of consciousness. It is fairly common for the healers to invoke spirits with whom they collaborate at the spiritual level. The contact with the spiritual world must be correctly initialized. The concept of TAM as applied in Takiwasi is based on the premise that each plant has its spirit that acts according to the behavior of each person.

Plant spirits are invoked in ritual sessions in some *ikaros*. The plants, and especially Ayahuasca, are considered an instrument of communication with the spiritual world, like an entrance door. Informants reveal that the more one is exposed to the effects of the plants the more he/she will develop a relationship with the plant spirit. The more times the brew is drunk, the deeper the experience. The deeper the experience the more the spirit “knows” the person (Håland, 2014). Some plant spirits seem to display human emotions, such as compassion, love, anger, pride and jealousy. Some plant spirits display a degree of morality and act as moral guides for people who encounter them. This teaching or guiding has a great impact on people, often leading to personal changes in terms of lifestyle, attitude, etc.

The spirits tell humans if they are capable of being a good healer. A good *curandero* can call for the help of specific plant spirits or chase away the undesired ones. According to some informants the healers

are more connected with the spirits of plants than with those of animals. A plant can have a spirit that reveals itself through animal form<sup>11</sup>; for instance, the boa snake is recognized as the spirit of Ayahuasca and is frequently met during the ceremony of ingestion of this plant. The “animal spirit” is often perceived by the informants as mirroring the characteristics of the individual, such as their strengths and weaknesses. Informants also reported having transformed into animals, completely or partly (Stuveback, 2015).

Spirits of dead humans, sometimes those of the patient’s relatives, can present themselves during Ayahuasca ceremonies. It means that there is something that needs to be solved in their relation with the living. It could be in the case of a violent death. Some informants affirm that the world of the dead and that of living beings must be separated, and when the former reveals itself in the realm of the latter generally it isn’t healthy. Calling on the spirits of dead humans in order to get some benefit is considered a form of “spiritism”, of magic. On the other hand, some informants say that the spirits of grandfathers and ancestors protect and lead humans in a good direction; their presence is considered timely during the spiritual fighting. According to some informants many Catholic priests do not believe in the existence of spirits and have had little or no experience of their presence.

#### 4. The spiritual experience

The idea of a spiritual world is considered central to Takiwasi’s conception of health, illness, and indeed patient care. The contamination by invisible spiritual forces presented as the cause of illness is one of the fundamental beliefs of the indigenous and mestizo populations of the Amazon region (Luna, 1986) is part of the etiology of traditional Amazonian medicine, widely used in Takiwasi. Therefore, the spiritual level is not only a metaphor in Takiwasi. It literally exists and is a plane of reality that is populated with both good and evil spirits, as we have already considered. A majority of the patients who in the past didn’t believe in such entities may now come to believe in them, and other patients gain

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<sup>11</sup> Clement Heinisch describes having had visions of animals during the Ayahuasca ritual: snakes of all colors, reptiles, a lion, an eagle, a wolf, dogs, felines, spiders. We could discuss if images like these would belong to animal spirits or “simple” animals, and possibly refer it to personal subjective indications.

a more open-minded attitude towards the possibility of their existence (Stuveback, 2015). What has been observed in Takiwasi is that people who had a personal religious path before starting the treatment, during the process go to the root of their faith, thus “radicalizing” themselves, in the good sense of the term: Christians become better Christians; Jews becomes better Jews; Muslims become better Muslims; Buddhists become better Buddhists (Apffel-Marglin, 2007).

A connection to the divine or a spiritual dimension is also a way of satisfying the spiritual needs of the self, something that in Takiwasi is considered crucial for any kind of personal recovery, psychological well-being and good living. Reconnection with spirituality is stated by Giove (2002) as one of the most important effects of Ayahuasca rituals and she describes this experience as a “*sensation of cosmic communion, of belonging to an incommensurable and ineffable whole: that is the pure religious experience, not confessional*”.

According to Horák (2013), who bases this statement on the testimonies he collected, for the treatment to be successful it is considered necessary to have faith. Not in a religion itself, but to have spirituality. Takiwasi tries to help patients to find their faith, whatever that might be. In his interview Mabit affirms that it is very relevant for the patients to assume a strong obligation to carry out a drastic life change in front of an entity that they recognize as absolutely authoritative and sacred. According to some informants to have faith is not always necessary, but recommended; possibly also more relevant is considered the chance to live mystical experiences, the direct meeting with God and the spiritual beings, defined by Mabit as a powerful medicine that encompasses several levels of the human being: body, emotions and spirit.

### **The relation between Catholicism and indigenous spirituality at Takiwasi**

As observed, the testimonies offered by the interviews conducted at Takiwasi seem to confirm the clear coexistence of experiences and beliefs developed from models belonging to Catholicism and indigenous

spirituality, made effective in order to reach the common goal of human health and salvation. We deem that this sort of coexistence could be correctly defined as a synergy.

The faith in God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin, the Saints and the angels, the experiences of the encounter with them, are lived in parallel or combined with the experiences of meeting the spirit of animals, plants, places, teacher plants, giving proof of the power of the *curanderos* and their *ikaros*. These experiences and beliefs aren't by any means alien to the cultural environment that surrounds Takiwasi. The mestizo *vegetalismo* spread in this region is historically mixed with Christian elements, and in this context a higher power is delivered to the Christian figures compared to the indigenous ones, according to a hierarchy that has been generally accepted. The beliefs of the operators at Takiwasi, who are in part traditional healers and part therapists of western school, clearly reflect this acceptance. The therapeutic approach of the Center seems then to mirror fairly well the cultural context, in terms of religious and spiritual beliefs, and the interviews of the informants that work at Takiwasi underline the role played by the therapists in transmitting to the patient the elements of both religious-spiritual traditions.

Based only on the testimonies emerged from the interviews we could have the impression of a sort of general syncretism between elements of the Catholic faith and the indigenous and mestizo traditional spirituality. However, if we look at the ritual context the situation appears different. From this point of view the two cultural categories "Catholic" and "indigenous-mestizo", that we have schematically focused as distinct and in synergy, appear to act in such parallel and cooperative pathways, but with an evident asymmetry that reveals a merging only on the indigenous-mestizo side. In Takiwasi there are in fact specific and exclusive places dedicated to the Catholic rite and prayers, and this is respectful of the Catholic doctrine. The integrity of the Catholic character of the chapel is essentially respected. The Catholic mass is an ordinary one and is performed by a priest regularly appointed. Where we find a sort of evident syncretism are TAM rituals, and particularly the most powerful one, the Ayahuasca ritual, performed in a site, the maloca, where we find the visual depictions of Jesus Christ, the Cross, the Virgin, the Archangel Michael, fixed high and in a dominant position on the wall behind the seats of

the healers that lead the ceremony. Then, the conditions under which the entities that we have called spirits come to be agents in this ritual are connected to the Catholic-indigenous “cosmology” of the Center on stable physical premises based on concrete iconographies and the use of items during the ceremony. These elements, far from being confusedly merged, confer a solid and at the same time dynamic structure to the ritual experiences.

### **The spiritual fighting and its mystical resolution**

As a consequence of the Catholic-indigenous symbolic framework shared at Takiwasi, that takes the concrete form of structured ritual settings, the experiences of altered states of consciousness emerging during Ayahuasca ritual sessions are to some degree patterned beforehand as well as along the ceremonies, in that way helping the human beings to cope with potentially dramatic encounters. We have to remark the wide emphasis reserved by the informants, particularly by Mabit, to the fighting among good and evil spirits, whose outcome is determined by the faith in the Christian God. The positive outcome is obtained also through acts of exorcism mediated by figures belonging to Christian religion and the indigenous spirituality. The testimonies collected seem to show that the strong realism and the very intense emotions associated that emerge during Ayahuasca sessions constitute the factors that mark a qualitative, decisive difference compared to any other experience. In that special condition any cognitive content can be engraved in the memory of the person who experiences it for a long time to come. In this way, the figures that reveal themselves during the rituals have to be almost inevitably remembered and can play a fundamental role to orientate the ongoing therapeutic process.

Considering the potential effectiveness of these dramatic dynamics, the central value of the spiritual world in Takiwasi’s conception of health, illness, and indeed patient care is evident. This spiritual world is populated by spirits and many of them reveal themselves as very dangerous to humans. Modern European thought has been fashioned by an idea of spirituality that denies the existence of spirits, including the evil ones. We share the thought of O’Shaughnessy (2017) when he affirms that while Takiwasi’s system poses a strong emphasis on controlling the negative aspects of the spiritual world,

the therapeutic goal is actually to support and foster a healthy relationship with the positive aspects of existence. He calls this perspective a dualistic one, but we consider that this definition fails to express the complex reality of the spiritual fighting, that needs to be further investigated.

“Spirits” are figures that have been gradually disappearing from the European (and therefore “Western”) scene starting from the critical and violent centuries of witch hunting (1500) and obsession with Satan (1600), for causes that have never been well understood. In an oversimplified categorization, we can now distinguish in Europe three very broad categories of attitudes towards the world, that can be defined as atheistic, theistic and a third, called “spiritualistic” or “New Age”, that despite its name gives little or no space to those beings recognized as dangerous spirits. In Amazonia, on the contrary, the reality is still populated by spirits. The Christian faith we find at Takiwasi seems coherent with a Christian faith of the past, which is now considered “archaic” in the European world.

In the context of this dramatic and potentially dangerous fighting with evil spirits, the mystical experiences lived during Ayahuasca ritual sessions can be resolutive. These experiences could be deeply healing because they instill in the person the assurance that God and the spiritual world exist, that they are real, although they reveal themselves beyond the possibility of ordinary thought. In this way the "mystical" category is taken out of the usually narrow space where it is enclosed and confined, as if it were an exception, something reserved for extraordinary people and beyond the reach of the average human being. In the work with teacher plants, anyone willing to surrender and open up to God can experience that extraordinary dimension. As already observed, according to our informants the mystical experience can constitute a foundation for the future life of the patients and the development of a true spirituality lived deeply in their own flesh.

#### **About ontology: materialism and spiritualism facing the Christian/Amazonian thought**

The synergy between Catholicism and Amazonian traditional spirituality poses many stimulating and problematic issues. We are dealing with the realm of experience labeled as “spirituality”, a word that

means many different things, especially in a place like Takiwasi, where the so-called spiritual experience is very physical, corporeal in a strict sense; “material” and “spiritual” at the same time. According to O’Shaughnessy (2017) Takiwasi requires legitimate scientific studies in order to internationally demonstrate the efficacy of its treatment. However, these same studies will often tend to intellectually purge or understate those elements that are not measurable. Nonetheless, in Takiwasi, paying attention to these elements remains an obligatory concern with regard to therapy and patient safety.

A very stimulating idea of O’Shaughnessy (2017), that we share, is that the issues of the relation between spirituality and healing in Takiwasi, and we add that of synergy, are not a matter of utility, but rather ontology. We agree with him in considering that while it remains unproblematic to write about the utilitarian function of spirituality in a psychosocial sense, the same cannot be said of any handling that considers the spiritual world itself to be an objective and discoverable external reality. He retains that an ontological perspective, more than a pragmatic one, predominates in Takiwasi when considering the spiritual and religious dimension.

We deem it very interesting that in the last decades a new trend has been rising within the anthropological thought that defines itself as an “ontological turn” (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017), and is born precisely from Amazonian ethnography<sup>12</sup>. In relation with this anthropological trend we can suggest that the work carried out in Takiwasi crosses the boundary between two different cosmological and anthropological conceptions that we can broadly define as “materialism” and “spiritualism” and constitute what we can define as the historical “big partition” that has been characterizing the last four post-cartesian centuries of the dominant Western culture (Descola, 2013). In Takiwasi, Catholicism and indigenous tradition seem to be in alliance with a very concrete and carnal spirituality in order to “spiritualize” the physical world and make the “big partition” more permeable.

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<sup>12</sup> The key figures of this movement that raise issues from Amazonia are Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, with Tim Ingold, Mary Strathern and Bruno Latour that take their ideas from other ethnological contexts.

This alliance is not so obvious and can be considered almost surprising by several authors. For example, Descola (2013) affirms the existence of a strict connection between the emerging dominance of “naturalism”<sup>13</sup> in materialistic sense, with the disappearing of animistic cosmologies from the western cultures, and the diffusion of the Christian thought, specifically of the Christian faith in the Creation as a divine act. Vilaça (2015) has recently refuted this assumption, reporting a more complex relation between the animistic and the Christian thought that was revealed during her ethnological fieldwork among the Wari people of the Brazilian Amazonia in contact with the Evangelic missionaries of the New Tribe Missions. In Takiwasi a different and interesting picture on this issue emerges, which requires further investigations.

In connection to this subject it is also interesting to observe how O’Shaughnessy (2017) proceeds to distinguish between the *lifeworld* and the *system*, using Habermas model (Habermas, 1987), in order to describe the process that operates effectively for the rehabilitation of drug addicts in the Takiwasi Center. In his model, Habermas made a sharp distinction between instrumental actions, which are non-communicative and non-social, concerned primarily with means and ends, intended to causally influence another for some utilitarian purpose proper to what he called the “system”, and communicative action that does not aim at the fostering of purposive goals, but rather takes an “intersubjective” stance that is oriented towards a process of mutual understanding, to acknowledge a subjectivity to the “other”. We don’t get fixed precisely to the Habermas model, but we think that the German sociologist, and after him O’Shaughnessy, have singled out, possibly still in an incomplete form, an essential difference that can lead us toward a deeper understanding of the distinction between material and spiritual worlds.

## **CONCLUSION: THE SYNERGY OF THE SINGING HOUSE**

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<sup>13</sup> “Materialism” is nowadays often presented in many socio-anthropological and philosophical debates as “naturalism”, a term that in our context seems very ambiguous, and we would prefer to avoid, given the strong spiritual meaning that Amazonian indigenous and mestizo people attribute to the almost identical Spanish word “naturaleza” (nature).

Speaking of a “spiritual” world seems by far different and more problematic than speaking of a “material” one. While we have many means to cope with the latter and even to easily measure its properties, given that material world means the same as physical, when we speak of a “spiritual” world we apparently lack any means to make similar operations<sup>14</sup>. This seems to be a big and basic issue of spirituality, but the facts we observe in Takiwasi’s synergy shows that spiritual and physical dimensions are in a continuous, invisible and deep communication. According to the shared “speech” of the teacher plants and the Christian figures, when we feel and think that somebody, a plant, has a proper sensibility, a mind, a will, when “him” or “her” is “another”, a person, we acknowledge that we are dealing with a spiritual being and we are operating a transformation of the physical world as well, through the change of our attitudes and behaviors. “He” or “she” could be a living being, a human, a plant or an invisible being, but is always “somebody” that dwells in the material and spiritual dimension. When we are able to recognize and acknowledge the living agent as a person, we can enter the life world<sup>15</sup> and have a door opened to the union of the two dimensions.

The synergy that emerges at Takiwasi poses some crucial and broad issues on both sides of the “big partition” between spiritualism and materialism that have marked the history of western cultures in the last centuries. Within the core of the Catholic field, it involves wide theological, pastoral, liturgical and ethical questions that are very difficult to deal with. We single out the following:

- a) The employment of psychotropic substances or the “aid of the plant spirit” as a means or “help” to embrace God and get rid of evil;
- b) The “contamination” of the Catholic faith with the indigenous-mestizo Amazonian spirituality;
- c) The legitimation of the traditional healers and the teacher plants as agents of knowledge, healing and salvation in the name and with the help of the Christian God.

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<sup>14</sup> We can try to measure what is called “spirituality”, in a still (and possibly always) debatable way, but cannot measure anything of the spiritual entities.

<sup>15</sup> As affirmed by Mabit during our fieldwork: "When the healer sings ‘the sun gives us warmth, the water quenches the thirst, that plant gives us strength, that plants dissolves our fear’, is performing a form of praise to life, to creation and pronounces or proclaims the Truth. And all truth has an exorcist function".

Beyond the fact that the synergy we are presenting from the Takiwasi Center reveals itself as physically real, the issues of its effectiveness in the healing of drug addiction is open to debate. Takiwasi shows promising results (Berlowitz et al., 2019) compared to other therapeutic communities of the same type and dimensions, but we have no proof that the secret of these scores resides in the synergy we are speaking of. Then, from the materialistic, scientific and biomedical side of the research, the Takiwasi's synergy opens several fundamental questions:

- a) The evaluation of its clinical efficacy;
- b) The exact physical verification and definition of all the spiritual agents that reveal themselves in the context of experiences described above;
- c) The relation between such spiritual agents and the clinical efficacy of their actions.

We cannot cope with these questions in the space of the present article, but we are listening with attention to what the teacher plants and the Christian figures in the Takiwasi Center are together telling to the humans: it sounds like words about the spiritual heritage of the indigenous traditions and the sacred value of the lifeworld that permeates reality, what for a Christian believer constitutes the living Creation.

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