



THE YEAR OF DRINKING MAGIC: TWELVE CEREMONIES WITH THE VINE OF SOULS



After all seven of us set our intentions with Rapha and Anna, we were free to leave the maloca and rest in our tambos (rooms) or otherwise pass the time until ceremony. I rested for a while in the hammock and drank a cup of very weak tea.

At about 7:30 pm I changed into a thick white cotton shirt and pants, both decorated with bright Shipibo designs, that I'd picked up in the Belen market in Iquitos specifically to wear in ceremony.

I returned to the maloca and lay on my mat, my back and shoulders leaning on some pillows piled up against the building's curved inner wall.

As other participants trailed in and took up positions on their mats, I looked up at the enormous round inner vault of the maloca and the wagon wheel beam structures at the top that held it together. They looked distinctly like a giant spider web.


I was filled with apprehension. How to describe such a feeling...

It was like sitting in a roller coaster car as it climbs the steep initial hill... clickity clack, clickity clack... my heart beating in anticipation.

As night fell, just before 8:00 pm, and with little fanfare, the curanderos entered the building.

Ricardo Amaringo sat directly across from us, with one other curandero on each side. Amaringo is a fairly small mestizo man with tan skin and jet black hair; he dresses unassumingly in T-shirts and shorts. He's the very opposite of a showman seeking any kind of attention. In another context he might be the guy who takes your keys at the airport parking lot, or who works the bar at a golf club. Yet this man is a master of inter-dimensional reality, as I was about to discover.

Trained in the Shipibo tradition, I was later told, Amaringo has been a curandero for more than 20 years and regularly practices dietas with different plants. In fact, he had just finished a long dieta with one plant from which he was still drowsy when he arrived back at the center. On Amaringo's right sat Erjomenes (pronounced er-hom-eh-ness, though many defaulted to the Anglicized Geronimo) — an elderly man with high-cheekboned features. Erjomenes fit my mental picture of the Inca wise man and I was happy when he was assigned to sing me a personal icaro during each of the three ceremonies.



On Amaringo's left sat Ersilia, Amaringo's sister — a strong curandero in her own right. Ersilia is a very warm and kind person who smiled and spontaneously hugged me when we first met. She felt instantly familiar to me, like a favorite aunt. Ersilia also makes crafts in the Shipibo style such as brightly colored bead bracelets, ornamental blankets, necklaces and other jewelry. She spent many hours on the property during the day displaying these wares, some of which I bought before my departure.

Rapha and Anna sat to the far right of the curanderos. They would drink a very small serving of la medicina so as to be with us in spirit but remain sober enough to help manage the ceremony's practical aspects.

We were joined this evening by another guest — Geoffrey — a middle-aged seeker from Baltimore on a month-long retreat.

In time Amaringo started serving the ayahuasca tea to participants, each of whom approached and sat down on a blanket directly in front of Amaringo's mattress. The shaman poured the thick brew into a small clear glass from a ceramic jug, and wiped off the edge after each person drank in a way that reminded me of communion wine in church. Some participants paused or whispered a prayer while kneeling with their cup, before tossing back the liquid.

I was the last to drink. The ayahuasca liquid lived up to its reputation as a repulsive elixir. The taste reminded me vaguely of prune juice, perhaps with an admixture of burnt coffee. The flavor didn't bother me as much as the sticky texture. I gagged reflexively when it hit my empty stomach.

Returning to my mattress, I reflected that there was no going back now; the psychedelic brew I'd read about for years was inside my body, and all I could do was await its effects.

Ah, such difference there is between an experience and a mere idea!

I lay on my mat, taking some comfort in the knowledge that this particular concoction was not adulterated with additives like the powerful hallucinogenic plant Toé. I'd asked about this early in the day. Toé is a plant suited only for very experienced shamans. Its visions can be nightmarish and can last for days. Some retreat centers are rumored to add it to the ayahuasca brew to guarantee gringo tourists their much-sought visions.

I had no watch, but started to estimate the minutes passing.

The shamans drank the medicine and everyone sat in silence. The electric lights remained on for about ten minutes. At some point Anna got up and turned them off from a switch near the main door. We remained quiet with just a candle for light for another ten minutes or so. Then this was extinguished and we all rested silently in the maloca.



In time the noisy generator shut down in the distance, and soft jungle sounds filled the night air. The fading light of evening silhouetted the dark jungle, visible through the large screen windows that ran the circumference of the building. Distant lightning occasionally lit up the space: we would have a large rainstorm that night.

Music pulsed from a nearby village: it was New Year's Eve and the faint sounds of revelers and their stereos were the only distraction in the otherwise pristine setting.

After what felt like 30 to 40 minutes I began to feel the effects of the medicine. Warmth spread from my stomach throughout my body and extremities. I sat up as a dizzying rush pervaded me.

Oh boy, I thought. Here we go.



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