

by Rak Razam

# JUNGLE FEVER

photos - above: John Bowman bottom: Vance Gellert

**We're 45 kilometres out of Iquitos, deep in the Peruvian Amazon, in the great green web of nature with our native shaman, Percy Garcia. He has the boyish enthusiasm of a physical education teacher, which is reinforced by his Western garb – Nike sneakers, tracksuit pants and soccer shirt, but he's been trained since he was a boy in the world of the spirits, and of the great plant medicine – ayahuasca.**

The night is alive with the sounds of insects and animals, like a constant hum of electricity. The maloca – a wall-less jungle hut – is lit by candles and mattresses litter the floor for the gringos to crash on as their bodies surrender to the pull of the medicine, and their spirits soar.

Percy's gotten changed into his ceremonial garb, a curious mish-mash of western clothes and indigenous bling bling that visually sums up the changing nature of Amazonian shamanism. Jaguar t-shirt, silk spotted pants and trainers, a feathered parrot hat with blue, red and yellow feathers around his forehead, offset with Christian rosary beads and a chacapa leaf fan in one hand.

He sits behind a makeshift altar, a wooden box covered with an intricate, geometrical patterned cloth that the local Shipibo Indians weave to represent the patterns one sees on ayahuasca. The altar is covered with ceremonial objects, little rainbow bead dolls, wooden cups, giant mapacho cigarettes filled with organic jungle tobacco, *Nicotinia rustica*, a smoke that cleanses and purifies and banishes bad spirits. Percy's got about a hundred mapacho cigarettes on the altar like he's expecting a horde of demons tonight, or he's having a stoner party with Cheech and Chong as the honoured guests. And last but not least, in plastic two litre San Luis water bottles, a thick, dark brown liquid – ayahuasca, the 'vine of souls'.

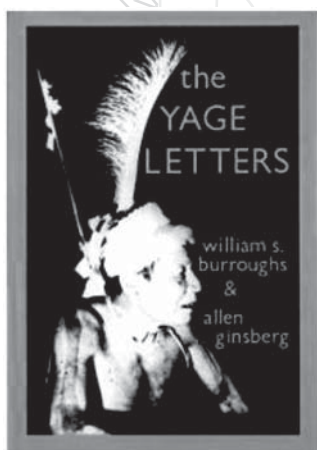
"When you have the cup in your hand, ask the spirit of ayahuasca to guide and show you your personal visions. You may see forms in the darkness - these are the night doctors, the plant teachers. I am the intermediary for them through my icaros," Percy says through a local translator, puffing away on his pre-ayahuasca mapacho. Percy's icaros are shaman songs, infectious melodies that roll over and over in your head, imprinting on you and giving you paths to follow in the hallucinogenic shamanspace ayahuasca takes you to.

We drink one by one, going up to the altar and taking the medicine in little wooden macca bowls. The brew is dark and phlegm like, and like all medicine it tastes foul, an earthy flavour that hits the quick of you and threatens to come up again. People burp and rinse their mouths. The sounds of the jungle deepen, monkeys screech, parrots call, and the ubiquitous sound of insects, as always, are switched on. Now, so are we.

And as the minutes go by and the dozen gringos collapse into the weight of their mattresses, the sound of vomiting fills the air. La purga the natives call it – the purge. Wracking heaves of spew usher forth from us all, as the ayahuasca reads our energetic bodies, finds the sickness within us and brings it up and out, sometimes from both ends.

After the purging, the ayahuasca starts to come on slow, snaking in and out like a lover, tantalising me. The spirit in the plant is playing hard to get – or, more like it – she's finding me hard to get. She's interfacing, overlapping energy fields as this jungle medicine comes on strong. There's a flash of vibrant green, jungle vision as something starts to happen, as I fall into a curious circuitry like pattern, lines of energy that are called 'ayahuasca rivers'. And beyond that – well, each journey is unique. The spirit of the vine comes alive, it guides and teaches and heals you, and on the other side, nothing is ever the same.

Ayahuasca is legal in South America, protected as an indigenous medicine. It's only when the active ingredients – N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and MAO inhibitors are extracted does the plant become a chemical, and subject to the law. But ayahuasca is not a drug, not in the Western sense. It cannot be abused like recreational chemicals because the taste and experience are so demanding, and the hallucinogenic effect is never the same twice. Rather, it develops a relationship with the drinker, sometimes healing the body, other times illuminating the mind, and deeper still, taking the soul on journeys beyond.



### \*1963

Ayahuasca or 'Yage' was first introduced to the west by by **William Burroughs** attempting to overcome his heroin addiction through use of the medicine. His experiences were published in **'The Yage Letters'** – a correspondence between Burroughs and his friend **Allen Ginsberg**.

But it will do none of this without the participant putting effort in – it's not just pop the red pill and escape the 'Matrix'. Serious students have to give up their Western ways and embrace a rigorous diet low in foods containing tyramine, a chemical which can react badly with the MAO inhibiting properties of the vine. No red meat, pork, sugar, salts, fat, caffeine, acidic foods, alcohol – or sex, all of which affect the body's sensitivity to ayahuasca. Tell that to a bunch of Western thrillseekers looking for some jungle kicks.

Nor are ayahuasca's practitioners shamans in the sense that the West has constructed them to be. The word 'shaman' comes from Siberia as a cultural import via anthropologists studying indigenous medicine men, and is thought to reflect the root of the word 'sham', perhaps reflecting the lack of psychoactive plants for much of the frozen Siberian winter. Throughout the Amazonian tradition – one of the longest unbroken threads of connection with the earth – the locals refer to these plants doctors as curanderos, from the Spanish – to cure. And surrounded by the mighty Amazon, the 'lungs of the world', where over 80% of the planet's biodiversity lives, these healers draw upon that diversity to work their magic.

Thousands of indigenous healers populate every village, town and city throughout South and Central America, with many sub-specialities to the craft for those populations big enough to support it. There are vegetalistas, those who diet and work with many medicinal plants, who believe that each and every plant and tree has a spirit in it, and the spirits can be contacted to give advice on their properties, what they cure and how they can be used. Then there are tobacco healers, the tabaquero who use the *Nicotiana rustica* exclusively to cleanse and cure, perfumeros, those who work with flower essences, encantos – stone healers, who work exclusively with the strong, deep power of special stones, and a raft of others.

It's worth remembering that in the jungle, the vast majority of locals have no access to western medicine. If their curandero can't cure them, they die. And if he can't make sick people better, not only will he be out of a job, but he's the one who bears the brunt of the cost of supplying the medicine. The sick person can most likely only pay once he is well. Surprisingly for outsiders, the jungle medical system seems to work pretty well, so well in fact that ayahuasca use is catching on with the upper classes in the big cities from Buenos Aires to Lima.

And it's not all light and angels, either. The nature of life here – the constant jungle heat, the sweat, the beautiful caramel-skinned women oozing sex appeal – and the lack of televisions – creates a culture permanently obsessed with sex. All of the curanderos agree that abstinence from sex before and after an ayahuasca ceremony is paramount to conserving your energy and transmuting it to work with the spirits, yet, in practice, this seems like another taboo that many do not keep.

Norma Arguila Panduro Navarro is a gentle, soft spoken shamana, a female curandera who was healed of tuberculosis at 17 by a village shaman and started on the long, male-driven path of plant healer. She runs the Estrella Ayahuasca, a lush, tropical retreat open to all, especially those in need of the nurturing a feminine touch can provide. Norma is like everybody's grandmother, dressed in her two-tone dark and light brown Shipibo robe and beads, seed head dress and glasses. She sits in her chair at the head of the maloca and doles out cups of sweet ayahuasca brew to the men and women in search of the female touch. She also believes that sex is sacred and that it's okay to have sex before and after a ceremony, that the spirits like and enjoy it and see nothing wrong with it. Perhaps it's the difference between a woman's orgasm – which deepens and replenishes, and a man's, which most often spends and drains, but Norma is the only curandera who comes out with this wisdom, and her Westerner-friendly pronouncements draw the ire of every other male shaman.



photo - Vance Gellert

In reality, the art of shamanism is all fuelled by the power of the will interacting with the power of the plants, and it seems all too easy for some shamans to warp that power to dark ends, to the 'shamachismo' that drives them to serve selfish ego desires. Power corrupts, and the spirit world can corrupt absolutely if it's not approached from a perspective of openness and servitude.

Some curanderos practise brujeria, the dark side of the force. The rumour around town is that there are more witchdoctors than curanderos in the Amazon – and one reason for this is that it's the best paid job. Men flock to the brujos to get back their girlfriends, women to make men fall in love with them, and some people to revenge themselves on their enemies. So the brujos work their black arts, projecting their will via virote, magic darts that hit their opponents and lodge in their spirit bodies, causing physical pain, and oftentimes, death.

"I could kill you if I wanted to. I could kill President Bush," Don Juan Tangoa Paima, a respected local curandero says to me one morning in his back yard. "But I wouldn't do that. I'm not that sort of person." From his humble home near the airport, Don Juan and his American apprentice Carlos Tanner treat the local community with powerful ayahuasca sessions twice a week, and any gringos that want to be healed as well. Juan doesn't set a price on his work, and anyone who is sincerely in need of healing is free to come – the spirit of ayahuasca won't let him refuse those in need.

Juan doesn't dress in shamanic gear to attract the tourists, he's a simple man in pants and a t-shirt, often wearing a baseball cap, the village doctor on the outskirts of town. He has a great sense of humour and an amazing amount of compassion, but he too has been touched by brujeria. "Ayahuasca has its dark



photos: Rak Razam (top), Vance Gellert (bottom)

side, too, all the plants do," he explains. "It's thirty percent bad, or drug, and seventy percent good, or medicine, and some people are using the drug side, looking for hallucinations and power within themselves," Don Juan says.

A growing number of tourists in search of spiritual enlightenment are pouring American dollars into the Amazon, and shamans are falling over themselves to compete for the international business. On the outskirts of Iquitos, along the sole highway that joins this most isolated jungle city of 400,000 to the neighbouring towns and villages, one of the most famous Shipibo shamans, the grandmaster of the art, Guillermo Arevalo, has built a sprawling multi-maloca complex to host his shamanistic retreats.

Guillermo is descended from a long line of healers, and trained as a traditional doctor in his hometown of Pulcallpa before being initiated into the shamanic world in his 20s. He's used his business know how alongside his healing arts to build a formidable botanical sanctuary, Espiritu de Anaconda – the Club Med of ayahuasca. There he can host upwards of thirty seekers into the mystery at between US \$50-\$75 a pop, per night, making him more money that most Peruvians can dream of.

But really, why not? Capitalism has long since invaded the jungle, ever since the rubber boom here back in the late 19th century. And Guillermo invests portions of the proceeds back into his community, and into connecting with the West and touring Europe and North America, leading ayahuasca retreats to spread the word of the vine. And he is a maestro – a master with the brew, leading the seekers into deep uncharted waters of the spirit world, piercing the dark with his short, sharp icaros, like stairways to heaven. His fame led him to Hollywood, or more precisely, to French director Jan Kounen's 2004 feature film *Blueberry*, a psychedelic western that pretty accurately conveys the visual hallucinations and experience the spirit of the vine can bring.

Sitting in his maloca in the dead of night, I'm stoned on Guillermo's powerful brew, full of chakrapunga leaves that potentiate strong DMT visions alongside the healing spirit of the ayahuasca. Around the circumference of the maloca roof a thousand thousand eyes are staring down at me like the tail of the world-peacock, blue-green and black and shimmering in the dark. Suddenly the darkness erupts with a thundering growl, bigger than us all, big enough to hold the world in its jaws. Snakes, crocodiles, writhing anaconda spirits and jaguar eyes imprint from my subconscious onto the canvas of the night, all my fears spewing forth with them. This is the power of the 'vine of souls'.

Some locals fear that the West is changing the nature of indigenous shamanism, and where once local youth wanted nothing to do with the old ways, now they're seeing a lucrative career path out of poverty, but not necessarily towards true spiritual practice. Iquitos recently held the second Amazonian Shaman Conference, organised by local businessman and sometimes curandero, Alan Shoemaker, and his wife Mariela. It's what drew me to Peru, like many of the 100 plus ayahuasca gringos in town, and in some ways it epitomised the best and worst of the West's fascination with shamanism.

It was held at the Hotel Parthenon – the biggest convention space in Iquitos, at an open-air conference room surrounded by palm trees and a large swimming pool. It's all very Melrose Place, and when the gringos amass to listen to the lectures by and about shamans, it has the feel of a Florida Amway meeting. Choosing your shaman is a bit like that game show, 'Wheel of Fortune'. There's various options, all with scaling payoffs, but only one top dollar – and of course the bankrupt booby prize. And in a town where every man and his dog claims to be a shaman, the booby prizes are out there.

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photo: Rak Razam

One such sham-man is Sayre Tupac Wiracocha, a show-man who claims to be a descendant from one of the last Inca families of Peru. This globetrotting spiritual salesman wears tight fitting brand label tank tops, designer jeans and has the clean-shaven, poster-boy looks of Antonio Banderas crossed with the relentless salesmanship of motivational speakers like Anthony Robbins. He is the Armani Shaman, and his workshops are filled with the beautiful and the cool in their matching sunglasses and latest season fashion, those who can afford US \$100 a session for his hallucinogenic cactus-inspired wisdom.

He comes on with the machismo of a self-help guru, forcing the crowd to their feet to do spiritual aerobics while he pummels their egos down like a drill sergeant in the army. Unfortunately, his massive ego still gets in the way of sharing enlightenment. He's the maestro, the awakened one – and you're either with him or against him. He'll enlighten you – his way – or you'll stay asleep, "one of the unplugged in the hamburger universe," he bellows at the shocked convention crowd.

It's all quite ironic, as Tupac conducts his ritual circles from within his lush hotel room, and at one point sits everyone down and forces them to watch key scenes from the Matrix while tripping off their dials on San Pedro cactus. Wisdom of the Ancients, hey what? Dollar signs and bling bling, but where's the service, the spiritual connection?

Elias Mamallacta, a shaman son of a famous Ecuadorian curandero family, said at last year's conference that, "Ayahuasca is the sacred mother of humanity and that is why we must take care of her. She can't be sold. Many use her as a business. These are not pure, true people."

Yet the business of shamanism is booming. Up there on stage at the convention are Ron Wheelock, a down-to-earth American shaman living in Iquitos with his three year old son, a kid shaman in training, Percy Garcia, Guillermo, Norma Panduro, Elias Mamallacta, Roberto Merinho from Brazil, Sayre Tupac, Don Juan and Carlos, and a host of Western scientists and academics discussing various facets of shamanism. All the shamans smile and make out that they can stand each other for the cameras, because a unified front is good for business, but the truth is much different.

"Not everyone wants to participate in the 'We are All One' ceremony," Kevin Furnas, a gringo plant curandero explains later, his piercing green-blue eyes looking right into me. "It's all political, y'know. Some curanderos are jealous of each other – it's a business to them and they're all chasing the gringo dollar, or they just don't get along, whatever. There's not much co-operation – it's all competition."

So it is in the Amazon, where the law of the jungle still pervades. Eat or be eaten, shaman or be shamanised. And as this indigenous plant spirituality is consumed and digested by the West, it's also transforming an ancient, indigenous culture. Ultimately the real winner is ayahuasca itself, whose vine is spreading throughout all corners of the globe, turning on the world. And maybe the spirit in the vine knows that, and we humans have to stop thinking we're in control, and just sit back and have faith.

Or maybe it's the jungle fever.

*\* this article was first published in Australian Penthouse Nov, 2006*

## \* 2008

The government of **Peru** declares ayahuasca a 'national treasure', thereby defying the American drive to outlaw all psychoactive power plants.

I have tasted the sweet drink of life  
knowing that it inspires good thoughts  
and joyous expansiveness to the extreme,  
that all the gods and mortals seek it together,  
calling it honey.

When you penetrate inside you will know no limits,  
and you will avert the wrath of the gods

We have drunk the soma,  
we have become immortal,  
we have gone to the light,  
we have found the gods,  
what can hatred and the malice  
of a mortal do to us now O immortal one?

The glorious drops that I have drunk set me free in widespace,  
you have bound me together in my limbs  
as thongs bind a chariot  
let the drops protect me from the foot that stumbles  
keep lameness away from me.  
enflame me like a fire kindled by friction  
make us see far  
make us richer, better,

I am intoxicated with you soma  
I think my self rich  
draw near and make us thrive  
weakness and diseases have gone  
the forces of darkness have fled in terror  
soma has climbed in us, expanding,  
we have come to the place  
where they stretch out lifespans....



art by Izwoz

**\* circa 1500–1000 BCE**  
“We Have Drunk the Soma”  
from the **Rig Veda** – an  
ancient Hindu holy text.