Located on the outskirts of Tarapoto, a small city in northeastern Peru, where the jungle inhabits the mountainous regions, Takiwasi is one of the first therapeutic centers to explore the promising interface between Western and Indigenous approaches to healing in the treatment of drug addictions. The purpose of the center is twofold. As a therapeutic community, it focuses on the rehabilitation of male drug addicts, combining traditional Amazonian healing methods with Western medicine and psychotherapy. As a research center, its goals include assessing the efficacy of its programs, refining its proposals, studying the psychophysical effects of the ritual use of plants, and translating those effects into a language comprehensible to Westerners.

The center’s name, Takiwasi—which means “the singing house” in Quechua—honors and celebrates the traditional curanderos’ songs, or icaros, that play a central role in the vast majority of the healing rituals held there. Founded in 1992 by French physician Jacques Mabit and a group of collaborators involved in Indigenous healing traditions, Takiwasi has developed an innovative pilot program integrating ayahuasca—one of the main psychoactive beverages utilized for thousands of years in Amazonian curanderismo—as well as other traditional plant diets and purges as potent psychotherapeutic catalysts in its drug treatment program.

Takiwasi’s integrative approach has been viewed with skepticism by holders of the “pure” ways. On the one hand, the use of mind-altering substances in addiction recovery seems esoteric and dangerous to many Western-trained specialists in the field; on the other hand, the practice of traditional healing methodologies by the Western doctors at the center has been questioned as to its validity and efficacy by many traditional healers and sympathizers of those ways. Nonetheless, after more than twelve years of work, Takiwasi shows an impressive success rate of 67% among those clients who have completed its basic nine-month treatment program (Giove 2002). This means that, five years after their graduation, most clients have not relapsed in the use of hard drugs, although some may occasionally use marijuana or alcohol. Considering the low success rates of other drug rehabilitation programs in Latin America and the United States, Takiwasi’s treatment approach deserves closer attention.

This article addresses the role of icaros in guiding and shaping the ayahuasca ceremonies held at Takiwasi, and it points out some particularities of their use within the center’s rehabilitation program. It is based primarily on in-depth interviews with Jacques Mabit and Rosa Giove, one of his closest collaborators, although their comments have been supplemented by information gathered by the author during a one-year research stay in the Peruvian Amazon, studying the healing properties of icaros. Approximately one-third of that year was spent at Takiwasi, working as a therapist and conducting research.

The Role of Icaros in Curanderismo

Icaro, icaro, or ícaro is the regional name given to the ritual songs employed by Peruvian Amazon curanderos in their healing work. There is no direct translation of the word icaro, but Colombian-born anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna (1992) suggests that it may derive from a Quichua (Quechuan dialect) term, ikaray, which means “to blow smoke in order to cure.” During traditional curing rituals, curanderos may sing—icarar in Spanish—directly over the crowns of their clients’ heads or onto specific parts of their bodies, in ways similar to how they blow black tobacco smoke onto their clients.

In the Amazonian cosmology, all beings—animate and inanimate—are viewed as containing particular icaros, which correspond to their essences, both material and immaterial. It is believed that singing an icaro over a person, substance, or object will invest that person or object with the specific essential power of the being the song embodies—for example, vigor, clarity, immunity, precision, or calm.

Traditionally, icaros are said to be “received” directly from the madres (spirit-mothers) of the plants, frequently through dreams, visions, or auditory stimuli experienced during intensive “diets” with the plants. These diets involve the ingestion of plants under strict ritual conditions,
Icaros may be sung and/or whistled. On occasion, they are accompanied by the percussive sound of the shacapa—a fan of leaves—or by other musical instruments, either autochthonous or introduced. The lyrics of icaros may be sung in traditional native languages, intermixed with words in Spanish, or sung entirely in Spanish, with the first category considered to be the most powerful. Although there are notable musical differences among distinct ethnic groups, most icaros are characterized by regular, normally rapid rhythms, limited melodic variations, and two or three repetitive phrases.

Icaros occupy a central position in the world of the curanderos. They have been described as the “quintessence of shamanic power,” along with the phlegm, or mariri, of the plants. Icaros are the curanderos’ weapons of healing, their sources of personal energy, symbols of their power and wisdom, and inheritances for their apprentices (Giove 1993; Luna 1992). When used during healing ceremonies, icaros are often sung along with the sopladas—the blowing of tobacco smoke or perfumes over the patient—in order to slowly “accommodate” their healing powers into the body to help loosen, repair, or “charge” the sick points. They are employed during the preparation of plant remedies in order to enhance the physical and spiritual power of the medicines.

Traditionally, icaros were sometimes utilized in community-oriented contexts, such as rituals conducted to aid in the fishing or hunting of specific animals, and in private rituals aimed at creating amorous “bonds” between two persons, or for causing damage to another individual. One must keep in mind that, in Amazonian cosmology, healing involves restoring relationships established within the patient’s body-mind-spirit complex, as well as relationships with the community and with nature. It involves treating the patient’s whole “being in the world.”

The Use of Icaros in Ayahuasca Rituals

Icaros constitute a vital element of many Amazonian ceremonies, playing a particularly prominent role in healing ceremonies involving the use of ayahuasca. In Peruvian mestizo curanderismo, one of the common terms used to refer to ayahuasca is la purga (the purge), which refers to the physical and energetic cleansing effects of the brew, and the main healing approach of many curanderos. Traditionally, ayahuasca is sometimes combined with various purgative plants in order to fortify these cleansing effects.

Interestingly, the visionary aspect of the brew—produced by the combined action of chacruna (or chacuruna) leaves or analogues and the ayahuasca vine—which tends to intrigue Western users, actually plays an auxiliary role in several traditional mestizo healing ceremonies. The visionary state is considered to be useful primarily to the curanderos and their apprentices, helping them to diagnose and treat the sickness, as well as deepening their healing knowledge, although the visionary process of the patient may be approached as contributing to clarifying the cause or other aspects of the disease. The goal of enhancing the patient’s self-awareness and inner exploration has become more predominant among mestizo healers in the last few decades, and is obviously one of the main objectives of the therapeutic use of ayahuasca rituals in Takiwasi’s treatment program.

During the ceremonies, curanderos rely on the act of icarar to invoke and praise the madres of the plants, animals, and natural elements, as well as the spirit doctors who work from the spiritual dimension. By singing their icaros and, occasionally, by reciting prayers, the curanderos are able to work collaboratively with the ally spirits invoked, who give their protection during the ritual and do most of the healing work. The action of icarar is often said to facilitate the healer’s inner vision in diagnosis. In addition, curanderos may use icaros to increase or decrease the state of mareación—the psychophysical effects of the ayahuasca—as well as to guide and even structure the visionary process. In the darkness of nighttime ayahuasca sessions, the voice of the curandero is typically one of the few perceptual referents connecting participants with the normal dimensions of space-time, influencing the patient’s subjective process and oftentimes playing a highly suggestive role in it.

Traditionally, curanderos speak of “curing” the person, which suggests a vertical doctor-patient relationship. However, several healers indicated that, in their healing work, the efficacy of the treatment also requires a stance of active receptivity on the part of the client, which is facilitated by the person’s trust in the healer’s powers, and is strengthened by the sonic bonding allowed through the icaros.

Takiwasi’s Treatment Program

As stated before, the treatment program at Takiwasi is an amalgamation of traditional shamanistic work—including purgative, medicinal, and visionary plants—and therapeutic work directed at understanding and integrating the visionary experiences. The psychotherapeutic work takes place both individually and in group contexts, and it is complemented by the daily working routine of the patients at the center, as well as by other psycho-educational, physical, and recreational activities. In baking bread, cultivating the garden, playing soccer, or develop-
ing bonds with other patients, their inner work is challenged to manifest itself in concrete, palpable ways, with the community serving as a mirror to the work’s effectiveness.

After undergoing an initial phase of detoxification, which lasts around a month, Takiwasi patients participate in weekly ayahuasca ceremonies, usually guided by Jacques. He is often accompanied by a master curandero and/or another member of the Takiwasi team, such as Rosa, who is a physician trained in both Western and Indigenous medicine and who is skilled in the art of icarar. When time and human resources are available, additional ayahuasca sessions may be conducted for patients who require special attention. Typically, a day before each ayahuasca session, patients undergo preparatory ritual purges, utilizing plants such as yaway puna, rosa sisa, or azucrea, among others.

The ritual structure used at Takiwasi, and by many mestizo healers elsewhere in the Peruvian Amazon, consists of three main phases. In the first phase, the curandero sets up the “foundations of his work” by establishing protection of the ceremonial space, himself, and the group; invoking the presence of his ally spirits; calling the visions; and screening patients to ascertain their current states of health. At the completion of this phase, the leader serves the medicine to the participants. During the second phase, the curandero focuses on facilitating the activation of the medicine, and conducts the individual healings—icarando (singing) and soplando (blowing smoke) over each of the patients. The third and final phase basically includes completion of the healing work, integration, and the closing of the session.

**Laying the Foundation for Healing**

At Takiwasi, the ceremonial form of the ayahuasca sessions, in which a specific order of icaros is employed, follows a standard structure that has been adapted to the center’s work with patients undergoing addiction treatment. This structure evolved out of Jacques’ idiosyncratic training as a curandero, and it has been refined over time through direct instructions that he and Rosa have received from the spiritual world. The work in the sessions at Takiwasi has a seal of Christianity—the spiritual tradition followed by Jacques—which is also commonplace in the repertoire of most mestizo curanderos in Peru.

Jacques begins each ceremony by invoking the six directions—that is, the four cardinal points, above, and below—creating a circle of protection around the group, in order to keep negative energies from entering the session. He explains: “Before serving the ayahuasca, the connection of the participants with the spiritual world has not been opened yet. Therefore, if negative energies appear in the session after cleansing and closing the space, it is assumed that they have emerged from the participants themselves, or from some energetically charged object that someone has brought into the session.” For this reason, participants are instructed not to bring anything but what they wear into the session. In this way, the curandero also protects his work and delimits its scope.

Each Takiwasi session opens with an icaro that invokes the spirit of instruction through lyrics that call upon animal youngsters and relate how a duck teaches her ducklings. Jacques explains the reason for this: “In Takiwasi, the general orientation of the sessions is directed at helping clients learn through the healing process. Other curanderos heal their patients by themselves, and the patient doesn’t see anything of what occurs. We want people to become conscious of the process and learn from it, so that it serves them in their lives. That is why I open each session with that song.”

At Takiwasi, before participants at the sessions are “invited” to drink, the ayahuasca is sung over with an icaro received by Rosa. This opening icaro originally came to Rosa during an ayahuasca session, and it literally pursued her for months in dreams and sessions until finally she wrote it down. When she eventually shared it with Jacques, he immediately recognized it as an icaro. Rosa says: “Its presence was so insistent. In one ayahuasca session, I was explicitly told that I had to sing this song at the beginning of each session. The icaro essentially asks permission of the plant to utilize it. I was told that when one enters a home, one needs to greet the host.”

After “inviting” the ayahuasca into the session, Jacques explains, the Takiwasi ritual proceeds with two chants: the song of the suy-suys, and the icaro of the lupuna. “The song of the suy-suys calls the birds that fly, and it serves to heighten the mareación so that one can enter into flight. Because the lupuna is the tallest tree of the forest and is very straight, invoking its energy generates a vertical axis and, at the same time, a cap or container so that the people can fly without dispersing their spirit in space. These two icaros work together by introducing both movements into the

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**“Madre Ayahuasca,” Rosa Giove’s Invocation Icaro**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Icaro</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madre Ayahuasca</td>
<td>Mother Ayahuasca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llévame hasta el sol</td>
<td>Carry me toward the sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De la savia de la tierra</td>
<td>From the nectar of the earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazme beber</td>
<td>Make me drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llévame contigo hacia el sol</td>
<td>Bring me with you toward the sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Del sol interior hacia arrriba</td>
<td>From the sun within toward the sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hacia arriba subiré, hacia arriba subiré, Madre...</td>
<td>Upwards I will rise, upwards I will rise, Mother...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use, habla, enséñame</td>
<td>Use me, speak to me, teach me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enséñame a ver, a ver más allí</td>
<td>Teach me to see, to see beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ver al Hombre dentro del hombre</td>
<td>To see the Man inside the man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ver el Sol dentro y fuera del hombre</td>
<td>To see the Sun within and outside the man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ver más allí, Madre...</td>
<td>Teach me to see, To see beyond, Mother...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usa mi cuerpo</td>
<td>Use my body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazme brillar</td>
<td>Make me shine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con brillo de estrellas</td>
<td>With the light of the stars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con calor del sol</td>
<td>With the heat of the sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con luz de luna y fuerza de tierra</td>
<td>With the light of the moon and power of the earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con luz de luna y calor de sol.</td>
<td>With the light of the moon and the heat of the sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madre Ayahuasca</td>
<td>Mother ayahuasca</td>
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<td>Llévame hacia el sol</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ritual instructions for this first phase of the session are very strict. Rosa states: “If someone feels sick during this phase, while Jacques is setting the foundations of the session, I cannot get up in order to assist him.” However, once Jacques has laid the foundation for the session, other collaborators are allowed to sing, and those participants who need to leave the circle temporarily may do so.

Deepening the Visionary Work

During the second phase of the ceremony, the purgative and visionary effects of the ayahuasca are most intense. During this time, Jacques may follow a general order of songs, but he will make variations according to special instructions received from the spiritual world.

As a general rule, he begins this portion by singing the “Icaro of the Tribes,” which invokes the warrior spirits of Peruvian jungle tribes, the energies of the rainforest, and the region’s curative traditions. He says, “This uplifting song is about strength and masculinity. Many times, participants don’t start to experience their visions until I sing this icaro.”

Next, Jacques sings a huarmi icaro—a woman’s icaro—that he learned from one of his teachers, which he has modified by integrating the Virgin Mary as a feminine principle. He explains: “In this icaro, one sings to the ayahuasca, to the chacruna, and to the datura, which are the principal plants. One sings first to the strong medicine (sinchi sinchi medicina) and to the white medicine (yura yura medicina), and then to the camalongo, which is a feminine medicine that takes out bad energies and brings the light with the golden serpent.

“Then I invoke Christ, the Virgin, the Holy Spirit, and Saint Michael. Here we begin to enter deeper into the spiritual world. After this icaro, all the possibilities open, and what happens depends upon the session. If I see that the session is already well launched and that there is a lot of mareación, I may wait a while before offering participants a second serving of ayahuasca. I will sing, metabolizing the energy that is in the air. As I have told you, my body is the thermostat.”

By this time during the session, most patients have accessed important personal material, purged, and momentarily left the circle to go to the bathroom.

At some point, Jacques begins to sing the icaro “Ayahuasca Curandera” and blow basil water over each participant in order to cleanse and protect each one from whatever the others have purged. “This was a very strong instruction,” Jacques says. “I cannot give a second cup of ayahuasca without first singing this song during the individual cleansings, thus restoring to each person what is theirs. Many times, the participants vomit at this moment.”

Breaking through Barriers

In many mestizo healing ceremonies, the curanderos serve each patient one dose of ayahuasca, at the beginning of the session. Usually, in those ceremonies, the mareación begins rapidly, and the work is completed within three or four hours. In contrast, at Takiwasi, a second dose of ayahuasca may be served, and the sessions can last between six and eight hours.

Jacques explains: “At Takiwasi, we essentially conduct two sessions in one. It takes a little longer—which is inconvenient in regard to the following day’s activities—but, at the same time, we can go farther. Many times, the patients await the second cup. Because my style encourages strong spiritual work that sometimes can release bad spirits, some participants experience a blockage, unable to enter into visions. Usually after this type of work, participants break through those barriers, so they enter into more profound visions—and they become ready to do so by drinking a second cup. I often utilize tobacco, perfume, or agua de florida (cologne) in the second serving, but rarely in the first.”

Jacques observes that his sessions tend to “rise” slowly and become most intense toward the conclusion, when the songs of the air are sung, and he suggests that occurs because his personality is closer to the element of air than to the earth or water.
energies carried by most mestizo curanderos. He explains: “When a curandero has the energy of earth, he can take to flight more rapidly because he is on the earth. But for myself, being of the air element, it takes more time to rise from the earth, and my energy expands more toward the end.”

Ingesting the second dose of ayahuasca is optional, and many times it is combined with the ingestion of some black tobacco diluted in water, which has strong purgative effects, accelerating the release of deep psycho-physical material. The individual healings begin shortly after participants finish their second dose of the brew.

**Icaros in Individual Healings**

The individual healing is usually conducted when the most dramatic effects of the first dose of ayahuasca have decreased. At this point in the ritual, patients are called by their names to approach the curandero or his collaborator for individual work. The person is then sung over (icarada) and blown upon (soplada) by the healers. In contrast to the icaros that are sung to the entire group during the first and third phases, the icaros sung during individual healings are selected according to special instructions that the curandero or his collaborator have received directly or indirectly from the spiritual world. The songs don’t necessarily change, but the curative intention is directed to meet the healing needs of each particular patient.

Rosa explains: “At such a time, what is going to happen is fairly unpredictable. Sometimes, by the time we do the healing, the mareación has already begun to subside for us, but sometimes, at the moment of singing, the state of mareación recommences. Sometimes, we may receive instructions earlier in the session, indicating that it will be good to do this or that for a patient. Often, the need to do a massage here or a prayer there will come to me. Sometimes, I start to sing one icaro and a different one comes forth. With my patients, the icaros almost always come out spontaneously. I don’t know if I am selecting the songs unconsciously because I know the clients. With visiting seminarists and guests, it’s different because I don’t know them, and I often consult with Jacques about which icaro to sing to them.”

Jacques explains that the instructions as to which icaros should be used for individual healings may come in seven ways: one may hear a voice directing what to sing; one may see a vision of a plant or spirit corresponding to an icaro; one may have a repetitive thought; one may physically sense what is appropriate to sing; one may rationally decide to sing one icaro and find that another icaro comes forth; a patient or collaborator may make reference to a symbol that suggests a song; or a collaborator may directly suggest a song. Jacques says, “Rosa clues me in on what to sing. And I do it, because I know that she has seen it for a reason. This is also a way of receiving a direction.”

As mentioned previously, each icaro represents the special powers of the particular plant invoked. For example, chiric sanango is a powerful plant used to heal cold, fear, shyness, excessive self-absorption, rigidity, internal contortion, and the inability to receive or display human warmth. Jacques explains: “It is a plant that will awaken and loosen up everything that is shrunk, closed, or bent. For example, it can bring flexibility to a rigid spinal column. If a person has such an energy in his body, and one sings the chiric sanango icaro into his body, the contrary energies are obliged to leave the person. This icaro can cause vomiting or diarrhea, or the energies can disperse into space. When I sing to such a person, his energies come into my body while the icaro fits itself to him, accommodating itself into his energetic body.”

The effectiveness of these healing songs may depend on both individual and group factors. Jacques suggests that there are two ways of overcoming energetic blockages through the means of the song—battling against them, or illuminating them with the light of love. Depending on the directions given by the spirit world, a smooth, sweet song of invocation can achieve results comparable to those produced by a battle song.

**Closure of the Session**

The close of Takiwasi sessions is marked by two icaros. The first is “Patuy-Patuy,” sung in Quechua, which was also performed at the beginning of the session. As stated, this icaro invokes all the animal youngsters—particularly ducklings—that are guided by the instincts of their species but that also learn from their progenitors. Jacques says, “This icaro highlights the need to submit ourselves to instruction, in spite of our own impulses or aspirations.”

The second closing icaro gives thanks to God for the session. This icaro, which was received by a seminarist, sings of the spiritual combat and faith needed to overcome negative forces. “It also refers to the four elements, particularly the fire that cleanses the heart, illumines the soul, and directs the vertical movement upward towards the Divine,” states Jacques.

Then, Jacques offers a final prayer of thanksgiving to God the Father and to all those spiritual beings that have been present to protect the session and support the participants during their process of healing and inner exploration. After the termination of the ritual is announced, the lights of the maloca (ceremonial building) are gently turned on, and the participants spontaneously share their experiences with each other. Jacques and Rosa typically dedicate about an hour to listening to and sharing experiences. Meanwhile,
Jacques offers this description of how he received a beautiful curing *icaro* in French during a dream: “I was in the house of my parents in France, curing a little boy. That boy was simultaneously my French nephew and the son of a Peruvian therapist at Takiwasi. In my hand, I held a datura flower that served me as a *shacapa*, and I was curing him using that *icaro*. At the same time that I was singing it onto him, I realized in the dream that it was an *icaro* that I did not know. While I was singing, I began to hear people arriving with guitars, confusing my singing. I began to concentrate seriously, and I woke up with the song in my head. I had the good luck to have a recording machine near at hand, so I leapt out of bed and rushed to the bathroom in order to record it before I lost the thread. Rosa thought I had diarrhea. The purpose of this song is for the curing of childhood wounds.”

Rosa also has received *icaros* in her dreams and during diets, and she distinguishes these from the ones that come spontaneously to her during ayahuasca sessions. Sometimes, she will receive a new *icaro* seemingly tailor made to help in a particular situation, and she later completely forgets it. Rosa’s *icaros* all come to her accompanied by visionary images. She describes one of these experiences: “I had a very strong ayahuasca session, in which I saw a figure with the seven chakras. I could see that each chakra had a color and a key, and that each key was a song—a sound. I was told I was going to be given eight sounds. And I began to receive the *icaros* to the extent that I was simultaneously doing work in those chakras. The process is still not complete.”

Occasionally, Rosa and others at Takiwasi have received *icaros* with the specific instruction to give them to Jacques. For example, as mentioned earlier, the *icaro* used to invoke and ask permission of the ayahuasca, sung at the beginning of the session, was a song received by Rosa, but it has been adopted as part of the basic ceremonial structure used at Takiwasi. Other visitors have been given *icaros* for Jacques that were received in Spanish, French, or even languages not known to the person, such as Quechua.

**Singing Counterpoint**

During traditional ayahuasca ceremonies, mestizo curanderos often employ a gentle volume, easy tempo, and rhythmical singing style. In contrast, Jacques’ singing style is strong, massive, penetrating, and “rapid”—a reflection of his strong personality. Jacques acknowledges, “I am passionate. I like the thing to get out, now, to move forward.”

Interestingly, Jacques no longer employs the traditional *shacapa* as accompaniment for his *icaros*, preferring to use a *maraca* (rattle). He explains: “I used the *shacapa* before going to Africa to initiate myself in the iboga tradition. There I was given a *maraca*, which I brought back to Takiwasi. During one session, I was directed to use it. Because I was accustomed to using the *shacapa*, which has a gentler sound, I had my doubts, but once I used the *maraca*, it opened up for me marvelously. Since then, I cannot seem to use the *shacapa* with any of my songs, although I don’t utilize the *maraca* with all my songs.”

He continues: “Whenever I listen to myself in recordings, I wonder why I sing so rapidly. However, I cannot sing more slowly, even if I want to. If I try to sing slower, I lose it; it’s as if I don’t have support. It’s the same with praying; I don’t understand why I need to pray with such velocity. But it’s like asking a person with a fast walking pace to walk slowly. He gets tired; it’s the opposite of what one would expect. I imagine that, with time, things are going to calm down.”

One of the stated goals of the work at Takiwasi is to help the patients, who are all males, reestablish their connection with a positive masculine archetype. This entails restoring their willpower, nourishing their sense of direction and internal structure, and encouraging the manifesting of their individual expression in the external world. Through his style of singing, Jacques provides a strong masculine presence that appears to stimulate this reconnection.

The singing styles of Rosa and most other collaborators at Takiwasi tend to be calmer. As Jacques points out, this reflects their primary connections to the elements of earth and water. The gentler songs of the earth, received and sung by Rosa, seem to serve the therapeutic function of cleaning and opening the regenerative channels of the body in accordance with more natural rhythms. In this way, an interesting musical counterpoint is established between Jacques and the others during the Takiwasi sessions, enabling the participants to face their inner material from different angles.

In sessions with mestizo curanderos, periods of silence tend to be more extensive than during Takiwasi ceremonies. Depending on the state of the person and the group context, these periods of silence can allow a participant to concentrate on inner work, can heighten the visionary state, and can facilitate the metabolization of the energies being unfolded. Nonetheless, too much silence can also subvert these
processes and obstruct the inner vision. In such cases, singing can tranquilize and loosen up the person, as well as providing structure for the work (see also Katz and Dobkin de Rios 1971).

**Icaros as Protection of the Curandero**

Traditional healing work requires the *curandero* to connect with the patient’s disease within the physical-energetic vessel of the curandero’s own body. Jacques points out that when this connection is established, he often experiences various discomforts—physical pain, exhaustion, negative thoughts, bad humor—inside himself. The singing of a suitable healing icaro provokes the raising of those sensations until the point when the *curandero* can metabolize these energies inside his body. For this reason, it is crucial for the healer to carefully prepare and fortify his body through plant diets and purges. The teachers help protect the student by inserting icaros of defense, or *arkanas*, into his body during the apprenticeship.

Jacques explains: “The song is an energetic-structural matrix, an energy form that is incorporated gradually into a person’s body. There is a difference between the healer temporarily putting a song into a patient and a teacher putting an *icaro* into a student so that he will be able to heal. In the second case, the intention is to infuse the song into the student so that it can be utilized later for healing. Having dieted with a plant, the *curandero* incorporates the plant in his body. Whenever the healer sings the plant’s *icaro*, his voice invokes the energy resident in his body and reactivates it by resonance. In this manner, the *icaro* helps the healing energy unfold in the healer as much as in the person whom he is curing.”

**The Central Role of Icaros at Takiwasi**

Probably one of the most important side contributions of the therapeutic work at Takiwasi has been the attempt to identify, expand, and translate the therapeutic effects of medicinal plants and their icaros within the context of a Western psychological paradigm. Traditional *curanderos* typically allude to the physical and spiritual aspects of diseases, employing expressions such as: “He is under a *daño*,” or “He is *cruzado* (crossed).” A *daño* is an intentional attack upon the energetic body by spiritual means, solicited or directly committed by some adversary. *Cruzado* involves some sort of blockage said to be caused by the transgression of a personal or social norm. *Curanderos* rarely refer directly to psychological states, and even when they do, their interpretations tend to include broad connotations and involve somatic aspects. For example: “He’s nervous,” or “She has coldness in the body.”

This attempt to translate the profound holistic effect of Indigenous plant treatments into psychological language, rooted in modern dialectic, is a formidable task, and Takiwasi is definitely one of the pioneer centers engaged in this endeavor. This task is further complicated by the fact that the administration of different types of plant diets and purges aims to meet the particular psychospiritual and physical needs of each patient, and the selection of *icaros* used in these ritual contexts is grounded in concrete and intuitive knowledge of the ways in which specific plants and *icaros* can affect these dimensions. Precisely because the work at Takiwasi is complex, the models and applied knowledge require continual adaptation.

It is clear that the *icaros* fulfill a central role in the structure of the ayahuasca sessions. They mark out a predictable sequence of events that, together with the strict rules of behavior in the sessions, provide a psychological container for this challenging work. These controls are particularly important for addicts, whose ego structures may be weak, and in whom the constant transgressions of internal choices and external norms have sapped the will and the sense of personal direction.

The treatment at Takiwasi works to gradually encourage patients to connect with their essences, confront their conflicts, acknowledge their dreams, and encounter their profound yearning for the embrace of the vast world of spirit, filled with meaning—the fundamental unconscious drive behind the addictive impulse. The focus on

**References**


**Susana Bustos** has worked for over ten years as a clinical psychologist, researcher, and drug abuse prevention consultant in Chile, her home country. Her interest in the healing potential of expanded states of consciousness and her passion for music and singing have dovetailed over the years, and she has trained in methods incorporating both. Susana has given workshops and lectures in South America, North America, Europe, and Asia. She is currently working on her doctoral research at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, California. Susana is also cultivating a happy marriage and a beautiful garden at her home in the East Bay.