Several scholars have given accounts of how Piaroa people describe shamanic initiation (Overing & Kaplan 1988; Mansutti 1986; Oldham 1997). These texts refer to initiates traveling through a waterfall inside a mountain (meye pabara) where they receive songs (meye) from Tseheru (the primordial Piaroa mother and culture heroine) that are recited to cure and prevent disease. Certain initiates of exceptional natural talent are said to pass directly to a cloud platform (māripa pabara) where they gain the power to divine and to kill (Oldham 1997:241). The process of training to become a Piaroa shaman has received comparatively little attention. While Monod (1970:10; 1987) has emphasised the importance of the ‘invisible world’ and related use of plant hallucinogens to Piaroa shamanism and constructions of reality there have been few attempts to articulate its internal logic. Many researchers have indicated that indigenous altered states of consciousness (ASC) experiences are inaccessible to the social scientist, arguing that cultural conditioning inhibits the anthropologist from attaining similar visions to those of his informants. While cultural conditioning affects what one sees during plant-hallucinogen-induced ASC, the way of seeing central to Piaroa shamanism is underlaid by neurobiological processes and can be learned and articulated, thus allowing for partial translation of an inner shamanic logic. Over a six-month period in 2000 I undertook a shamanic apprenticeship with José-Luis Díaz, a successful curer of the Parguaza River. My experience as an apprentice, culminating in initiation to an elementary level of shamanic power, forms the primary source of information from which this examination of shamanic training and initiation unfolds, and is set within a wider context of interviews with, and observations of, men of the Parguaza, Sipapo and Carinagua rivers.

Piaroa people, and most anthropologists, distinguish between two types of ritual specialist to which we can apply the term shaman: meyeruwa and yuihuáhuáruhua (Mansutti 1986; Oldham 1997). Meyeruwae and yuihuáhuáruhuae work in a complimentary fashion to understand and

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1 I have used the New Tribes Mission-developed alphabet for the transcription of Piaroa terms, and have omitted some difficult to print diacritics that would have indicated nasalisation. This alphabet most closely parallels the one used by literate Piaroa people.
regulate health and adaptation within communities. Each develops the ability to carry out a number of rituals designed to prevent and cure disease, and to defend people from attack by evil spirits (märítō). Each specialises in the consumption of plant hallucinogens and familiarity with a range of complicated songs (meye) concerning prescribed relationships between gods and humans, humans and animals, and humans and humans that enable them to understand inter-personal adaptive processes, and to prevent and cure disease. Meye are learned, recited and transmitted exclusively in conjunction with the range of altered state experiences achieved through the consumption of yopo, Banisteriopsis caapi, dādā (Malouetia sp.) and tobacco. Meyeruwa translates as ‘owner of songs,’ while yuhuāhuāruhua translates as ‘owner of yopo.’ The latter is distinguished by greater powers of diagnosis, divination and sorcery. I define shamanism as the deployment of culturally-valued altered states of consciousness for the attainment of information used for the adaptive benefit of an individual or a community. Meyeruwa and yuhuāhuāruhua can each be considered shamans because each interprets information accessed in different modes of consciousness, and applies this information to the adaptive benefit of those around them.

While there are far fewer Piaroa people learning to become shamans now than there may have been in historical times, the core fundamentals of deepening facilities for the use of ASC within a culturally specific mytho-historical framework remain unchanged. To become a shaman Piaroa men must undertake years of specialised training by senior shamans, frequently their fathers, uncles or grandfathers, and pass through several stages of initiation culminating in the piercing of their tongues with a stingray barb. Training does not end, however, with this final test of might. Piaroa shamanic training is a continuum of suffering and scholarship. As José-Luis put it, ‘like you are studying now, we shamans study our entire lives.’ Levels of knowledge and power can conceivably be extended ad infinitum to those who devote themselves to a life of sensitive psycho-social study, refinement in the use of technologies of consciousness, and familiarity with mytho-historical knowledge. José-Luis summarises his shamanic training in the following account:

My father was a shaman and he told me that I would also become a shaman. But at first I did not want to learn. Then I traveled to many

2 While there are formal prohibitions impeding women from learning how to play certain musical instruments used in the warime festival, there do not appear to be any formal limitations against women attempting to become shamans. With reference to the Cuao River Zent (1992, n.d.) argues otherwise. There may be regional or temporal variation with respect to Piaroa women taking up the shamanic vocation. Boglár (1978) cites ‘fragments of stories’ documenting female shamanic activity in historical times. In conducting interviews with a broad range of Piaroa men along the Parguaza, Sipapo and Carinagua Rivers, I was assured that while women could learn to become ‘a little bit shaman’, none currently were. According to José-Luis, his mother had recently ‘retired’ from active shamanic practice. For the sake of expediency I use masculine pronouns to refer to shamans and their students.
different indigenous areas -Laguna Morichal, Tama Tama, the Upper Orinoco- and met shamans there... later Sipapo, Cuao, Coromoto, Autana. I studied there, took the stinging ants, experienced much hunger, suffered. Then I returned to live with my family on the Samariapo River. I studied more, told my family that I wanted to become a shaman. Then I went to Ciudad Bolívar to work on the highway. I returned to spend two years in Alto Carinagua with Pure Mari [an elder shaman], and went back to the Upper Cuao. It was there that I received my yopo kit and crystals. I studied three years in Limón de Parhueña with Lino [a recently deceased shaman]. Lino taught me how to cure snakebites. He gave me two cures [umeyuwa]. I wanted three. I wanted to go back and learn more but he said ‘no, there is nothing more that I can teach you.’ Then people on the Parguaza River called me here. At the time there were no shamans here, only evangelical people. So it was here that I made my home. I came to the Parguaza to take care of people and to make the food safe.

Piaroa shamanic training usually begins during adolescence, although many young boys are pre-selected by their fathers from a much earlier age. In theory, any young man who demonstrates a commitment to learning can seek training from a ritual specialist in his family or village. As evidenced by José-Luis’ account, some shamans seek training from a range of elder practitioners. Most shamanic training usually runs, however, from father to son. In this case the boy is exposed on a regular basis to fundamentals of the shamanic arts: preparation and consumption of plant hallucinogens; use of ritual paraphernalia such as crystals (huaruna idoqui) and the huräruä; the prevention and curing of illness through song; and ritual healings involving the extraction of pathogenic agents. The child lives in the same house in which his father performs the preventative songs that recount mythological adventures, and is enculturated into a lifestyle characterised by specialised manipulation of esoteric goods and mythological knowledge. Based on this child’s behavioural response to these activities, and overall psychological disposition, the father will decide, sometimes during infancy, sometimes during puberty, whether or not the child has an innate facility for the acquisition of shamanic skills, and thus whether or when to commence training. The son of a shaman from Sarrapia, Colombia, put it thus:

When a child is born his father [a shaman] decides whether he will become a shaman. The shaman blesses his child from birth so that he might grow to become a shaman. For a shaman to choose to teach a child, however, the child must be considered patient, relaxed, and without egoism. (Carlos Fuentes).
To determine the learning potential of their initiates, Piaroa shamans use a form of psychological assessment. Character traits amenable to selection as shamanic apprentices include patience, concentration, inquisitiveness, interest in ritual activity from an early age, and well-developed expressive and creative facilities which are rated more highly than mechanistic skills. These character traits echo a similar cluster of physical, neural and emotional predispositions relating to temporal lobe syndromes that Winkelman (2000:153-4) argues 'have adaptive value and contribute to the professional functions of shamanistic healers through “kindling”, a long-lasting or permanently reduced threshold for neural excitability and greater susceptibility for entrance into ASC.’ They have been described elsewhere in the cross-cultural literature on witchdoctors and psychotherapists (Torrey 1986). Katz (1976; 1979; 1982) argues that people with well-developed facilities for fantasy and imagery are more likely to become what he refers to as ‘trance healers.’ José-Luis believes that the second of his three sons (nine years-old) has the psycho-social sensitivity, patience and demeanour to become a shaman.

The first hallucinogen to which Piaroa children are introduced is dädä, a drink made from the bark scrapings of Malouetia sp. Provided there is a shaman in their extended family, most young men are introduced to dädä in childhood or early adolescence as a means of awakening in the novice a vibrant sense of the power and immediacy of ASC in relation to culture-specific symbol structures, such as myth and song, or to what Monod (1970:10) has referred to as the ‘invisible world.’ José-Luis has given each of his two young sons (aged seven and nine) a dose of dädä. When a young man commits himself to becoming a meyeruwa, training proceeds with the regular use of tobacco (jätte, Nicotiana tabacum) and two further hallucinogens, tuhuipä (Banisteriopsis caapi, referred to in colloquial Spanish as capi) and yuhuä (yopo), a snuff derived predominantly from the ground seeds of the Anadenanthera peregrina tree.

Tobacco is a fundamental component of Piaroa curing practice, and is always used in conjunction with yopo and capi in the induction of ASC, the technologies and associated myths and songs that form the backbone of Piaroa shamanic practice. Tobacco is the thread that links hallucinogen-induced forms of ASC to waking consciousness. A shaman’s familiarity with death enables awareness of rebirth, and hence health. According to Wilbert (1990:157), while hallucinogens ‘are particularly effective in providing the vivid imagery that illustrates the shaman’s celestial journey, nicotine, the bi-phasic drug in tobacco, is exceptionally well suited to manifest the continuum of dying...’ Familiarity with the ASC produced by yopo, capi and tobacco use provides the Piaroa shaman with the means of acquiring knowledge and power used to effect cures, understand social and individual problems, and potentially cause sorcery harm to others. This power is referred to as märipa.
On the Importance of Perceiving Evil

The initial major lesson, learned as a basic building block for, and reflection of, the power of one’s máripa is the recognition of evil as it may be manifest in hallucinatory experiences, a person’s intentions or maladjusted behavioural and psychological response patterns, in maleficent forest-dwelling spirits (märi), or in environmental events read as markers for the harmful desires of others.

The first thing with shamanism is recognising evil and good. This is fundamental. But this takes more than a year. This is a long process. (Ruffino, meyeruwa, Alto Carinagua).

While not everything is either of a good or evil nature, many misfortunes and diseases are attributed to the malevolent intentions of other shamans, or to the manifestation or manipulation of máritō. Novices must learn to recognise these beings and be aware of the intentions to cause harm that other people, including competing shamans, possess. Recognising good and evil involves using your máripa to see into people, animals, sounds and events: to read the causality behind an action or event. The Piaroa notion of evil is somewhat amorphous, encompassing unproductive or damaging individual practices, behavioural patterns or psychological dispositions to outright violence, criminal activity or the sighting of a jaguar or venomous snake. Often evil is camouflaged as beauty, as shamans will use treachery to lull their victims into submission.

Piaroa shamans use plant hallucinogens to achieve heightened states of perception enabling optimal processing of psycho-social and environmental data. Visions are used to crystalise empathetic assessment of a person’s intentions and motivations, the significance of animal noises and movements, the passing of recent social events or illnesses. Once the apprentice is able to perceive evil in all its physical, psychological, behavioural and visionary manifestations, he is able to begin to understand how to turn a damaging psycho-social behavioural pattern into a more-amenable situation favouring improvements in social relations or an individual’s health.

On 21 May 2000, José-Luis and I made a trip to Puerto Ayacucho to purchase supplies. This trip also served as a means for him to teach me how to recognise evil, as it can be manifest in people: intentions, motivations, subliminal forces, maladjusted psychological propensities, disequilibrated behavioural patterns, and the physical places in which such psycho-social formations might commonly be manifest. We went to several bars to ‘investigate what the people of Ayacucho are like’, ‘how evil is manifest in these places’, ‘how to see criminals (malandros).’ We watched criollos

3 Máritō is the plural form of märi, although José-Luis would use the two interchangeably. Máritō can be perceived individually but generally exist as part of a group.
dancing in an outdoor beer garden to live salsa-merengue music. We analysed social dynamics, picking good and bad intentions according to gesture, expression and feelings generated from recourse to the use of our integrative consciousness: märipa. We picked out the ‘bad people’ with ‘criminal tendencies’, thieves and the power relations between players and the played in this social context.

José-Luis said ‘shamanism is like anthropology. Both are concerned with understanding people, how people work.’ There was a fight outside the bar. As we went to sit down at one table, José-Luis glared at me, shook his head subtly, casting his eyes to the left, where a pair of very dark looking men were eyeing us. They were ‘delinquents’ and wanted to steal. We chose a table in a corner and watched the dancers: guys making moves on girls, girls choosing to dance or not, Piaroa girls dancing with criollo men, and shady-looking characters who were watching the play of social interactions as we also were.

Later that night we retreated to the house of José-Luis’ parents in a rapidly-growing barrio of Puerto Ayacucho. Before we tried yopo, José-Luis said that he wanted me to concentrate on Barrio Triángulo to assess its good and its bad, the evil that is there, and how the forces of good and bad are manifest in power relations and demographically throughout the barrio. He told me that there was much evil there, many delinquents, especially lots of young men drinking excessively, avoiding work and disrespecting their parents. He said that his mother had made a protective shield around the area of Triángulo in which she, her husband and José-Luis’ sister live. While formally retired from active shamanic duties, José-Luis’ mother has been working for some time to understand the psycho-social dynamics of Barrio Triángulo.

As we left Puerto Ayacucho for the Parguaza River the following day to continue my training, José-Luis made it clear to me that the evil he had explained as being required learning to become a Piaroa shaman is not culture-specific, merely manifest differently according to geographic and demographic context. The same sensitivities that are honed through opening an inner sight through familiarity with ASC and used to perceive malevolent spirits (märitö) in the jungle can also be deployed to understand urban dangers. José-Luis made it clear that ‘evil’ results from pan-human psycho-social disequilibrium and maladjusted behavioural patterns perceptible through the study of a person in place in conjunction with the regular and controlled pursuit of ASC: the culturing of märipa.

Shamans and Anthropologists: The Limits of Culturally Concordant Drug-induced Perceptual Alterations

While many have been critical of the extent to which Western anthropologists can understand indigenous shamanic practices through
participation in ASC activities, I argue that such immersion is necessary. With reference to the study of shamanism I advocate the marriage of radical empiricism with familiarity of the neurobiological substrates underpinning ASC experiences. A radical empiricist anthropological approach emphasises ‘our practical, personal, and participatory experience in the field as much as our detached observations’ (Jackson 1989:3). In this instance, the interaction between observer and observed is crucial, making the fieldworker the experimental subject whose experiences are then treated as primary data. As Winkelman (1990: 2000:117) has demonstrated, ASC used in shamanic practices are manifestations of a fundamental homeostatic dynamic of the nervous system, and thus lie within pan-human experiential domains. To Geertz (2000:10), cultural interpretation ‘is not a simple recasting of others’ ways of putting things in terms of our own ways of putting them... but displaying the logic of their ways by putting them in the locutions of ours.’ Without direct experience of the parameters and technologies of consciousness central to Piaroa cosmology and ideology a Piaroa ‘shamanic reasoning’ will neither be understood, nor translatable into our locutions.

Historical accounts made by anthropologists, botanists and travelers partaking in indigenous rituals involving plant hallucinogens, and more recent scientific research into the psycho-physiology of plant-hallucinogen-derived ASC, have opened the doors to shamanic perception. After describing his first ayahuasca experience Harner (1972:348) recalls being ‘transported into a trance where the supernatural seemed natural... I realised that anthropologists, including myself, had profoundly underestimated the importance of the drug in affecting native ideology.’ Harner (1972:356) goes on to say, ‘words alone can never adequately convey the realities of shamanism. These can only be approached with the aid of natema [Jívaro ayahuasca drink], the chemical door to the invisible world of shamanism.’ A novice level of navigation through powerful visionary worlds can offer insights into the ways in which the grammar of the shamanic language in general, and healing and divination in particular, function. Participation by anthropologists in indigenous consciousness practices can facilitate articulation of the processes of mental imagery cultivation, ways of seeing, that are central to native religious and mythological constructions, eschatology, and perceptions of reality (Furst 1976; Noll 1985; Winkelman 2000).

Crocker (1985:18) notes that ‘the great bulk of analysis [on shamanism] appears to me to be headed in the wrong direction.’ He argues that ‘any study of shamanism among Amerindians... must focus on analyses of the natural

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4 There has been a significant amount of anthropological debate concerning the ways in which shamanic practices are underlain by pan-human neuro-biological capacities, and the implications that this theory has for inter-cultural interpretations of native shamanic symbolism. On the former see for example Laughlin et. al (1990), Winkelman (2000: 1990: 1986) and Lewis-Williams & Dowson (1988). On the latter see for example Francfort, Hamayon & Bahn (2001) and Locke & Kelly (1985).
symbolism they employ to understand and regulate pollution, rather than the inaccessible psychic experiences of “trance” (Crocker 1985:25). In many cases there are organic relationships tying the ‘natural symbolism’ that Amerindians ‘employ to understand and regulate pollution,’ and the experiential and functional dynamics of culturally-valued ASC. Several scholars have argued that ASC experienced by anthropologists studying indigenous healing practices are necessarily different to those experienced by their hosts, as both are conditioned by a cultural and personal matrix of ideologies and experiences (Grob & Dobkin de Rios 1992; Dobkin de Rios 1984; Harner 1972; Bourgignon 1973). Wilbert (1987:197) notes that ‘it is a well-known fact that fieldworkers who remain largely outside of the cultural landscape of their target society very rarely have drug experiences similar to those of their informants.’ Dobkin de Rios writes, ‘I tried very hard to get inside my informants’ heads and eventually I realised that culture conditions drug-induced consciousness states’ (Grob & Dobkin de Rios 1992:308). In her 1990 analysis of Piaroa shamanism Overing refers to ‘visionary travels,’ but her only reference to the hallucinogens central to Piaroa shamanic practice comes when she declares that philosopher Nelson Goodman ‘is a surprising source of help to the anthropologist trying to make sense of hallucinogenic and shamanic reasoning among people of the tropical forest’ (Overing 1990:603). Locke and Kelly point out that altered states of consciousness are experienced in different ways by different people, especially according to cultural loading, and ‘that crucial problems in cross-cultural research on ASC’s include not only clarification of the physiological substrates of ASCs, but also, equally essentially, the production of rigorous phenomenologies of altered states’ (Locke & Kelly 1985:17). Monod has highlighted the centrality of individual experience to Piaroa shamanic ideology.

A symbol is not only something that is said, seen or thought. It is something created through experience. Accordingly, at the limits of Piaroa thought there is the notion of existence as experience. This experience is that of the formation of consciousness. With language consciousness becomes risked in interactions with other realms of individual experience. The ultimate question to be asked, before consciousness and before language, in these individualist terms, is not: what is Man? But: what symbol am I? (Monod 1987:164).

At least an inkling of the types of experiences from which shamanic symbolism is constructed can be made apparent through attempt at understanding and articulating the processes of mental imagery training and comprehension that are shamanism’s practical core. ASC are not inter-culturally inaccessible. The issue is not so much whether the anthropologist and the indigenous shaman see the same thing during drug-induced visions. What is important is that the initiate can learn how to see in the same way that his indigenous guide does. So long as the former can begin to use a
similar map for understanding and conditioning the range of ASC experiences employed by the latter, we can begin to translate the inner logic of shamanism. While cultural conditioning allows for potentially very different interpretations of visionary experiences, the technologies used to enhance and manipulate these ASC, how shamanic practices work and what they feel like, can be learned independent of cultural conditioning. Knowing how to see involves developing mental imagery cultivation skills required to process visionary information in a culturally meaningful manner (Noll 1985). The what of seeing proceeds from the how of seeing.

The inner world of Piaroa shamanism is heavily conditioned by the parameters of experience of capi and yopo-induced visions. There are significant cross-cultural similarities in psycho-physiological responses to yopo and capi visions that allow for enhanced inter-cultural translation of yopo and capi-derived ASC (cf Meyer 1994; Metzner 1999; 1998; Naranjo 1973; Mandell 1980). The hallucinogen-induced experience central to the acquisition of Piaroa shamanic knowledge is determined by a number of neurobiological processes. These processes, common to the integrative mode of consciousness, facilitate accelerated information processing capabilities that have been harnessed to the solution of adaptive problems in numerous societies (Pribram 1980:55; Winkelman 2000; Laughlin et al 1990; Taylor, Murphy & Donovan 1997; Mandell 1980:422; Ripinsky-Naxon 1995; Vinogradova 1975). The integrative mode of consciousness is produced from ‘activities and functions of the basic brain structures and their homeostatic balance and integration’ (Winkelman, 2000:113). It facilitates social and psychological integration as symbolic and physiological systems of information processing are integrated in ways normally repressed during waking consciousness (Winkelman, 2000:128). According to Winkelman we can define three primary characteristics of the integrative mode of consciousness. [1] The integration of information across different functional systems of the brain...; [2] the ability to act on structures of consciousness as content rather than self...; [3] a greater degree of flexibility and conscious control of biological and mental systems’ (Winkelman 2000:129). These characteristics determine, to a large extent, the form and content of Piaroa shamanic knowledge.

Through a combination of Spanish and Piaroa José-Luis and I were able to communicate the process of learning how to see in a manner concordant with native practice. Ease of communication in Spanish facilitated a rapid process of social bonding between José-Luis and me. This was greatly assisted by the fact that José-Luis had an excellent command of the national language, partly as a result of several years spent working as a cook with criollo men on road-building projects in Bolivar State. José-Luis gave me Piaroa terms for many key concepts, while describing the relationships between these in Spanish. I asked José-Luis whether it was possible for a non-indigenous (non-Piaroa) person who was not a native Piaroa speaker to
learn the Piaroa shamanic arts. José-Luis replied by saying ‘there are many levels of knowing... [that continue to] the postgraduate level of shamanism.’ He assured me, however, that learning how to see was possible, and would allow me to understand the basics of what I needed to see (in terms of Piaroa symbolism) because he was taking me ‘inside the world of máripa’ as only shamanic apprentices experienced.

I have taught others [tourists and an archaeologist] superficially. This is a very insecure way of knowing. To know superficially [por encima] it is impossible to defend oneself from enemies, to recognise evil. People will rob you, and your spirit will remember. For this reason I am teaching you from the inside. To know the world from inside las rocas, how the spirit is. You will know how the world is from inside.

Teaching me ‘from the inside’ (por adentro) refers to the process of familiarisation with what Monod (1970:10) has termed the Piaroa ‘invisible world.’ This is a world of causality, integration, synaesthesia, spirit, and meaning saturation. The ‘invisible world’ is invisible to those who have not trained sight to the shifting dynamics of psycho-social, behavioural and physiological relationships made manifest during rituals involving plant-hallucinogen-induced ASC.

**Learning How to See: Training with Yopo and Capi**

In relaying my interest in the study of shamanism to shamans from the Parguaza and Sipapo Rivers, and to those of Alto Carinagua, I unerringly met the same initial response. ‘You want to know about being a shaman? You must know this,’ and the man would show me his ritual basket containing yopo, bifurcated bone inhaling device, fish-tailed wooden snuff tray, the block of wood used to grind yopo tablets into a fine powder, and the animal hair brush used to dab up excess snuff from the tray. When a student begins to learn he must first understand how to acquire máripa through learning how to navigate the ASC engendered by combined yopo and capi use. The acquisition of máripa is the primary goal of rites of shamanic initiation (Monod 1987:135). Máripa is cumulative. On how best to begin to see with yopo, José-Luis put it thus:

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5 The notion of an ‘invisible world’ existing parallel to that inhabited by flesh and blood people and animals appears frequently in the literature on South American shamanism (cf Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975; 1996 for the Tukano; Colsen, 1977 on the Akawaio; Thomas, 1982 on the Pemon; Harner, 1972 the Jivaro).

6 The Piaroa use one of two sources of hair in the manufacture of yopo brushes: agouti or collared peccary (Tayassu tajacu) (Zent n.d.:273).
This is the way it is. This is the only way to do it. You lie there in your hammock relaxed, eyes closed, like you’re watching a film. No moving around... This is a pot. This is a plantain. But with yopo things are different. One has to understand how things look like in yopo [after taking yopo]. In time you develop sensitivity to the sounds of the songs, and this way of seeing becomes clear.

The ‘way of seeing’ that becomes clear in time is an understanding of the parameters of, and navigational techniques within, yopo-capi-induced ASC. The capitán of Pendare de Parguaza, whose father had been a successful curer, argued that ‘with the yopo one must first of all listen. Then you must look carefully at all your visions. Listen well. Watch well... seated, with yopo... In time you will understand everything...sorcery, how to cure snake bites, everything.’ The processes of ‘listening’ and ‘watching’ within yopo and capi derived ASC accord with Noll’s (1985:445) bi-phasic interpretation of shamanic training, whereby the shaman must learn (1) to enhance the range and vividness of internal imagery and (2) to develop greater skills with which to manipulate this imagery. Knowing how to ‘cultivate mental imagery’ is the key to diagnosis, healing and divination. In Piaroa terms:

Once you see the point, you know how to get there, you don’t forget how to navigate. But you have to see it well. It is like having a bookmark and you open your book at the same place each time you know how to get there and from this place you can see, you can travel to the future. (José-Luis).

Knowing how to cultivate, manipulate and understand mental imagery within a range of ASC involves understanding the effects that fine alterations in sensory, pharmacological and psychological stimuli have on one’s perception. It also involves following the integrative path of understanding that märipa offers, enabling one to hone ASC experiences to particular culturally and individually productive ends.

José-Luis introduced me to the use of yopo and capi as his father and grandfather had taught him. ‘My father always taught me during the day rather than the night. During the night there are many evil spirits that can cause the initiate harm.’ We began by smoking long, hand-rolled cigars (jätte) and a tobacco paste absorbed through the gums (jattëka). Then I began to suck the bitter inner bark of the B. caapi plant (tuhuipä). Taken in small quantities, B. caapi has mild stimulant properties and acts as a hunger suppressant. In larger doses there are a wide range of perceptual alterations, including accelerated empathogenic capacities and hallucination. José-Luis began by offering me small quantities of yopo; one or two plates full derived from one crushed yopo tablet. There is a synergistic effect between B. caapi’s beta-carboline alkaloids and yopo’s tryptamine alkaloids facilitating longer-
lasting and more visually-charged ASC (Rodd 2002). After initially trying both yopo and capi on their own, José-Luis began to offer me capi (taken as a fresh wad to be sucked or in beverage form) several hours before we consumed plates of yopo. Sometimes José-Luis would inhale yopo before me, other times after. We would always consume together. The frequency and quantity of my yopo and capi consumption were increased concomitantly with José-Luis’ perception of my improving familiarity and confidence in managing the range of perceptual alterations associated with yopo-capi derived ASC.

Maintaining self-confidence during early experimentation with yopo is of primary importance. ‘You must not fear. If you have fear you will not see anything. You must not fear the yopo.’ Initially this is difficult, as one must learn to submit ego and body repeatedly to an overbearing cardiovascular and central nervous systems assault. Monod (1987:149) describes the Piaroa drug experience as one ‘physical suffering and its visionary transcendence.’ One must submit to a high-resolution inner vision-world in which the conventions of waking visual perception, whereby one is accustomed to feeling a specific relationship between physical space and optical phenomena, no longer apply.

The first wave of hallucinations that comes on almost immediately after inhalation is short (2-8 minutes), and characterised by moving luminescent shapes in a backlit sea. Visual hallucinations are extremely intense and totally engaging. The pace at which visions come on and their sheer visual brilliance make them utterly captivating. On occasion, I would interpret the dancing, colourful imagery as visitation by sentient beings, spirits. This primary stage of yopo intoxication is also characterised by rapidly increased heart rates, blood pressure and general physical discomfort, chest or head pains, extreme physical weakness, loss of balance and nausea. Movement is seriously impaired. The synergy between yopo and capi (probably allowing for increased amounts of tryptamines, including the toxic methoxy-tryptamine, to be processed by one’s body) increases the probability that one will vomit soon after yopo inhalation. For this reason yopo is always taken on an empty stomach. I would continue to vomit during this initial stage of yopo intoxication throughout the first few months of my training.

Upon vomiting, the more unpleasant physical symptoms of yopo use pass and a new visual order (5-10 minutes) begins. Closed-eye hallucinations become incredibly high-resolution. Frequently I would perceive anthropomorphic beings apparently attempting to communicate with me, frequently showing me something of either total beauty or intense terror, always of sublime importance seemingly beyond my comprehension. The rate of

7 B. caapi contains the psychoactive compounds harmaline, harmine and tetrahydroharmaline. See Naranjo (1979). Both A. peregrina and A. colubrina are related to the Acacia and Mimosa genera and have been demonstrated to contain the psychoactive agents 5-Methoxy-N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (5-MeO-DMT), 5-Hydroxy-N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (5-OH-DMT) and N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in their seeds and bark (Stromberg 1954; Fish, Johnson & Horning 1955).
movement of optic imagery slows at this point and I am able to navigate within what appears to be a spatially defined visual field. It is possible to zoom in and out in order to focus on the soft, textured, infinitely seductive beautiful forms visible during this second stage of yopo visions. At the same time, however, I would frequently feel that the objects of my focus were slowly moving from right to left, from where they would eventually dissolve into the next, distinct hallucinatory phase.

The third stage of yopo visions involves a diminution of the resolution quality of visions, but the ushering in of ever-deeper waves of thought and comprehension. During this phase (lasting up to half an hour), visually perceptible imagery becomes experientially secondary to torrents of comprehension, often resulting from contemplation of the rapturous imagery of the preceding phase. While pulses of coloured light remain perceptible, they no longer capture attention. There are numerous manifestations of synesthesia. Feelings have a perceptible shape. Thoughts and emotions can be visible. Events are seen and felt. This is a time of bringing together the important points of conflict, (dys) functionality, adaptation and maladaptation in one’s life and those of others.

In describing the purpose of yopo in Piaroa shamanism, José-Luis would repeatedly attest, ‘yopo is used to see the future.’ Moreover, it is not merely a matter of predicting or intuiting what might happen, but of understanding why something might happen, or what is required to make it happen. During the third stage of yopo visions it is possible to see how current or ideal behavioural patterns can lead to possible future outcomes. Māripa affords understanding of how to clear a path to possible desirable individual and social futures. A synesthesiastic chain of awareness bridging physiological, psychological, social and cultural knowledge point one along a path of actions leading to healthy individual or social equilibrium. According to Winkelman (2000:87) mental ‘images represent goals that recruit and coordinate a wide range of unconscious systems and plans of action to achieve the goals desired.’ One can be made aware of how a particular personal practice might be misguided or how a relationship is not being dealt with in a profitable manner and what might require change in order to bring about a better equilibration of personal needs and social requirements, allowing for a healthier individual or social adaptation to psycho-social forces. The shaman’s communitarian role as social healer is predicated upon sharp sensitivity of the individual’s position within a web of social relations, the body as a field interacting within a series of energy demands and supplies that have cumulative consequences for a person’s well being.

During the final liminal stage of yopo intoxication there is a crossover between open and closed-eye hallucinations. The deep thought-waves of the previous stage carry over into a state in which bodily functions begin to return to normal. Physical movement is now possible. While there is a distinct carryover of mental imagery and visualised thought-feeling-forms from the previous phase, a normal visual-spatial relationship can now be established
with one’s physical environment. Over a period of half an hour or more there is a gentle float down from the jarring, sensory saturation of yopo ASC to waking consciousness.

Over time José-Luis would give me ever-larger doses of yopo. I would recount my visions, what I felt, what I saw, what I comprehended, and José-Luis would relay to me culturally-specific interpretations of these forms and feelings. As Piaroa shamans do in proceeding to understand a particular social or individual problem, I began to use guiding questions as a handrail to assist me through the total sensory onslaught of rapid, labyrinthine physical, mental, emotional, visual and psychological alterations that yopo use engenders. By means of focusing my attention in yopo and capi use on understanding of the practical conventions and felt aesthetic textures of Piaroa shamanism, combined with second-hand knowledge of Piaroa symbol structures, myth and general Eliadean notions of ecstatic mediation, I became aware that it was possible to have visions concordant in structure and content with those of Piaroa people. While the hallucinatory experiences I was having were charged with introspective reflections on my personal life trajectory, there were many forms and feelings that José-Luis was easily able to translate for me according to a Piaroa worldview. For example:

10:30pm. We take several trays of yopo. The visions begin as a colourful flying fish or bird visits me. It introduces itself to me so that I could see it well, know what it was, know it well. I saw it from many angles. It flapped its wings and writhed. It showed me its peculiar motions. Then I traveled with it to a place where there was a rapturously beautiful swirl, something like a large luminescent seashell. I had the distinct feeling that the bird had taken me to this place for a reason, so that I could study this awesome swirl. The glowing swirl existed in a three-dimensional sea of darkness. I was able to navigate around the swirl to see it from different angles and eventually to approach it and see it at macro level, almost entering inside. It was utterly, captivatingly beautiful. The three dimensions seemed in perfect proportion. I knew the swirl to be very powerful, an essence. I felt I had been taken there for a reason and I studied it.

Later, José-Luis told me:

This is the source of all healing. Seeing this crystal allows you to have clear [comprehensible] visions. Everyone must see this stone. But there is more. While you have seen it, you still do not understand how to use it yet. You still do not know how to cure...

I asked José-Luis what I lacked in order to be able to cure. He explained that I must first master diurnal yopo navigation. This involved gaining my own diurnal spirit familiars, which would protect me and send me information about dangers, impending illnesses, or coming events.
During the day there are different spirits than during the night. I am teaching you like my grandfather taught me and because of this I feel that you are susceptible to these other spirits... Other shamans take yopo all night. But they do not know the day spirits. The day spirits help me to take care of the house, my family, to know the future. It is another level. It is difficult to navigate. And the rocas, to take yopo there is different again. You travel in a curiara inside the roca to a place of great power.

I was keen to extend my young máripa learning curve and asked José-Luis about the rocas.

You are not ready for this yet. You must suffer before going to the rocas and I am not sure that you want to suffer. I see that you have no fear with the yopo. But I have suffered much; days without eating, biting ants, wasp stings...

José-Luis smiles, making a sharp, vertical cutting gesture with his two hands, then letting one rise gently. “I am going to take you slowly now.”

**Stages of Initiation**

Apprentices must pass through several stages of initiation, each one involving a build-up of intensive training (extensive yopo use, dietary restrictions or fasting, the learning of prayers and songs), culminating in a painful test of the initiate’s strength that should facilitate a breakthrough to a higher level of knowledge and power. Training within a paradigm of controlled suffering along a path to enhanced facilities for the use of integrative consciousness is referred to as máripa teui. Each painful initiation is referred to as máripa teai.

According to Oldham (1997) young men were traditionally taken through initiatory rites of suffering during the warime festival. Warime may no longer be practiced with regularity in any area of Piaroa settlement. Several decades ago all young men would have gone through the first two stages of initiation (ants and wasps), regardless of whether or not they may have continued with more specialised shamanic training. In the Upper Cuao these rites continue to be performed regularly, and have particular relevance as initiatory ordeals for hunters (Zent n.d.: 293-4). In the three major settlement areas in which I worked (Parguaza River, Sipapo River and Alto Carinagua), boys are not currently undertaking máripa teai, nor have most men for over a generation.

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8 There probably has not been a warime festival held on the Parguaza River for over a decade. Pure Māri held warime in Alto Carinagua in the late eighties at the request of a Franco-Venezuelan film crew. In the upper-Cuao warime might still be held irregularly. People of the Sipapo River could not recall the last time a warime festival had been held.
The few who are taking their māripa teai do so because they have chosen to devote their lives to the study of shamanism, to being meyeruwa. Initiation now occurs when the primary teacher feels the student is prepared to make a leap to the next stage of learning, independent of coordination with inter-village celebrations of ritual power such as warime.

Initiation rites can be performed in any number of places. The most potent are performed at rocas (meye pabarā), powerful, semi-sentient, spiritually charged rock-formations in jungle waterfalls. According to José-Luis, any roca with a waterfall would be suitable for the performance of māripa teai so long as the sound of water rushing over the rocks is clearly audible. Each meyeruwa has preferred roca sites for the performance of māripa teai. José-Luis prefers sites some distance from settled areas. Some of the large rocks in these sacred waterfalls are known by Piaroa shamans to be points of entry to a realm (hūl) inhabited by Piaroa gods. Performing initiatory rites at these sites enables the initiate to enter the roca and into communication with Tseheru, the Primordial Piaroa mother and ambassador of shamanic songs, who teaches the novice how to cure and sing shamanic chants. Young men are initiated at the roca to ‘experience their naturaleza, to understand their future, to see everything, to know the world.’

Piaroa shamans develop long working relationships with the rocas that they have entered during vision quests and initiation ceremonies. As this relationship develops through the accumulation of visionary experiences accrued at these sacred sites, the roca becomes as a spirit familiar to the shaman and can ‘send you information,’ for instance, the knowledge of when someone is going to die or visit. It is not merely a place, nor is it a spirit in the sense that most other Piaroa spirit beings are mobile or transformative in some way. The roca has a life force and character of its own, and is both the doorman and doorway to the Piaroa shaman’s most highly regarded realms of consciousness.

The first level of initiation involves pressing a purpose-built wooden rack interwoven with dozens of biting ants (yänäu, Pachycondyla commutata) onto various parts of the initiate’s body (Zent n.d.: 221-223). All children used to undergo this ordeal to gain luck in a range of activities including hunting, fishing, love and interpersonal skills. Currently very few go through the painful initiation. The second stage involves wasp (pāju) stings administered in a number of ways. A special basket is made to protect the initiate’s eyes. Mey eruwa coax wasps out of their nest by blowing tobacco smoke and/or striking it with a stick from the side opposite to that of the waiting novice. José-Luis told me that sometimes initiates rub honey on their stings or drink a strong fermented drink (sanihe), specially blessed by the meyeruwa, to dull the prolonged pain. The novices can then relax in their hammocks as the pain eases. Being stung by wasps purportedly brings luck in attracting a good

9 Use of a purpose-built wooden rack interwoven with dozens of biting ants is apparently widespread throughout the Guyana region of South America. See for example im Thurn 1883.
spouse and/or game animals (Zent n.d: 119). The final and highest stage of shamanic initiation requires the novice to pass a stingray barb (s’bāri uyuroqui) through their tongue (twice for the more resilient). After spending several weeks in seclusion eating nothing but manioc flour and water (yucuta), the student will graduate as a meyeruwa and can begin to practice as a curer.

Piaroa shamanic training involves the periodic application of extended dietary and sexual restrictions. In each case these include abstention from sweets (anything containing sugar, including fructose, such as pineapples, plantains, bananas, sugarcane, and other wild forest fruits), and salt and spiced food. José-Luis and others mention periods of sexual abstinence, although it appears from different informants that the rigidity with which initiates adhere to this restriction varies according to individual practitioners. From an early age José-Luis was groomed by his parents and grandfather to become a shaman. Over several years he studied in conjunction with other intra-generational members of his extended family. He speaks of an ascetic lifestyle during years of training that continues to mark his existence 30 years later.

I never used to eat plantains, salt, peach tomatoes, sweet food, and sugar or chili. I never played games with other children. The training began early and was very serious. While I trained I never fooled around with girls and had to bathe before seeing people every morning. Now I can do these things... This training has entered my blood, my vision and my spirit. It’s all there. Once it is there you will always have it.

Māripa, gained through intensive periods of shamanic training and initiatory rites, is not lost in time. Although José-Luis argues that there is no regular need to follow an ascetic training regimen later in life, a shaman might choose to do so to bolster the force of his māripa, or to gain greater understanding of an important issue at hand. It is common for ritual elders to partake in the dietary restrictions and painful ordeals they administer to their students. According to Monod (1987:159), physically trying initiation rites, including long periods without eating animal foods, enable the maintenance of dialogue with the spirits of game animals. Reducing diet to a simple

10 Ruffino, a meyeruwa from Alto Carinagua, also mentioned a white, stinging ‘worm’ (puhāatakawa) that is placed on various parts of the student’s body: legs, chest, arms. There is archaeological evidence for a comparable initiatory piercing of the tongue by thorns and stingray barbs in Mexico. See Furst (1976: 11).

11 See Agerkop (1983: 52) for further discussion on Piaroa dietary restrictions. See Luis Eduardo Luna (1984: 145) for an analysis of very similar food restrictions adhered to by ayahuasca using shamans of Iquitos, Peru. The ayahuasca concoction involves a similar combination of B. caapi and tryptamine-containing plant ingredients as does the Piaroa use of capi and yopo.
minimum, and avoiding sexual relations purportedly facilitate the development of heightened visionary skills. That is, by reducing sensory inputs an initiate is able to heighten the clarity of their yopo-capi-induced visions enabling them to better apply these skills in a social context when the shaman re-integrates into quotidian social flows.

**Initiation as Cultural Loading: to Enter la Roca**

I now give an account of my own initiation to an elementary level of shamanic power, culminating in the pressing of biting ants (yānāu) into my flesh and subsequent visionary entering of la roca. This account is situated within cross-cultural analyses of initiation rites involving the use of plant hallucinogens.

I had been living with José-Luis for six months, learning about māripa-how to use yopo and capi, how to recognise māri and other manifestations of evil- before he mentioned that I should begin preparing myself to ‘enter la roca.’ At least two meyeruwa are required to take initiates through their māripa teui at the roca. While one shaman concentrates on teaching and guiding the apprentice, at least one other must concentrate on defending an uncontrolled, spiritually-charged forest environment ‘from evil spirits, malo… It’s not like [taking yopo] here in the house… When I learned, my grandfather and uncle were both there solely for defense. It is much safer that way.’ For my initiation, José-Luis called on the help of Jeripa, an elder meyeruwa friend of his from upriver.

Four days prior to leaving, my food intake was restricted to yucuta (manioc flour and water). The following day, José-Luis and Jeripa gave me a heroic dose of yopo as a test (prueba) to see ‘how far I could see.’ I began by eating a large section of duhui huoika tuhui pā, the elbow section of B. caapi considered by the Piaroa to be the strongest form of the plant. A senior shaman from upriver had recently given us this capi to be used over the course of my māripa teui. The capi was strong and I felt clear-headed but a little nervous as we began to inhale yopo.

‘To be a shaman you must be puro macho,’ José-Luis said as he inhaled the first of what would be fifteen plates of yopo. I was given ten plates of yopo in immediate succession. Dizzy, nose completely clogged with brown-green powder-ridden mucous, I stumbled into my hammock and entered the first wave of visions. I had never taken more than five plates, and initially felt like dying. I would later recount to José-Luis and Jeripa what I had seen and felt. ‘How high did you get?’ they asked me. The following day I felt as if I had been reborn. I was fresh and focused on the coming wave of psychologically-testing ordeals of physical pain. Being forced to my experiential limits in an all-out cardiovascular and central nervous systems assault during a ritual of extreme intoxication, I looked forward to entering la roca.
José-Luis made it clear to me that the ultimate end of the training I was undertaking was to enter the roca and into direct communication with Tseheru. Before we went to la roca, José-Luis told me what I should expect to see there, and how I should interpret these visions. After I had fasted, endured the biting ants and had taken yopo I would learn ‘how many years I will study, how I will become an anthropologist, how I will get my degree, who I will marry, how many children I will have, how long I will live, the future, everything.’ José-Luis said that in the ceremony performed at the roca I would learn everything I needed to know in one powerful voyage: how to bless objects, how to cure people, how to sing. I would meet Tseheru and she would teach me these things. He told me that I might see his enemies, evil shamans, and that I must be ready for them also.

There is nothing higher, no higher comprehension than that achieved at the roca. [But] you must be strong Robin. There are always some who lose themselves there, go mad, running around, screaming, crying, violent, furious. If you cannot handle the pain with calm you will not see anything.

To go to the roca in search of knowledge is to allow the full force of māripa-knowledge, power, myth, time and god- to be channeled through you by the roca. This can be a frightening experience. ‘Those who scream are not able to accept the power of the roca and cannot understand anything.’ Those who fear physical pain or ego-shattering hallucinatory events do not pass their māripa teui. A meyeruwa from Churuata Don Ramón (Paria River) put it thus:

And it is not easy the shamanic apprenticeship: you are bitten by ants, your tongue is pierced by a stingray barb, you have to drink bitter water (capi juice). To pass the celebration of the barbs you must not fear! If you do not fear you learn much more rapidly. If you fear, you cannot think well. (Jesús Caballero, 1967 (in Boglár 1978: 23, trans).

Fear inhibits the experience of culturally-valued visions. Moreover, those who can subsume fearful or painful experiences into the successful navigation of peak ASC will have stronger healing and divinatory capabilities as shamans. This might be explained in part by ‘a psychological reorganisation’ following the collapse of the psyche through a symbolic death in the surrendering of attachment to pain and ego, ‘guided by an archetypal drive toward holism or holotropism’ (Winkelman, 2000: 82).

The association between intensive training in the use of sensory and culturally loaded symbolic stimuli, including the controlled experience of extreme pain, with ‘knowing everything’ is not casual. For the Piaroa, pain opens pores in an experiential seal separating the life of gods, animal spirits, and human consciousness (Monod 1987: 156). Paramount for the success of
a novice shaman is an understanding of the relationships between psycho-
physiological stimuli control mechanisms and processes of imaging that allow
for calculated deployments of integrative consciousness: understanding of the
relations between muscle and emotion, individual and community, person
and place, time and space. Controlling the experience of pain in ritualised
environments of hypersuggestibility is a means of sharpening control of the
tunings that let in certain types of experience, while keeping others out.
Releasing oneself from fear of death, fear of pain, and fear of loss of personal
identity, is an important initial step toward mastering shamanic abilities for
the manipulation of one’s own consciousness in order to understand and heal
the suffering of others. Sensory and emotive stimuli come into sharp relief
during periods of intense physical pain. Learning to control the experience of
pain in one’s own body, within a continuum of training in techniques of
consciousness manipulation, allows one better to understand how to mitigate
the experience of pain in others.

On the day that we leave for the roca, José-Luis prepared a fresh jug of
capi: a beverage made by straining a large quantity of fresh B. caapi in
water. About twenty 40cm stalks are used to make up one litre of bitter
juice. José-Luis and Jeripa each take a large mouthful, but I am allowed only
a small taste until we arrive at the roca, four hours’ walk into the jungle.
Towards dusk we arrive at a small cliff overlooking a waterfall. There is
evidence of an old lean-to that José-Luis had made for earlier ceremonies
performed at this site. ‘I have always come here,’ he says. ‘Can you feel it?
Listen. La roca is talking to us. This is a place of great power.’

As we ate manioc by the side of the river, Jeripa remarked that there were
märitö nearby, but that ‘they didn’t come here to fight and neither did we.’
José-Luis said that it was very dangerous coming up here in such a small
group. Three was the absolute minimum for such an endeavour, with one
meyerusua concentrating solely on defense.

On the way to the roca, José-Luis collects many of a particular, medium-
sized angry black ant (yänäu) in a bottle, coaxing them out of their home in
the sand. At the roca site, José-Luis and Jeripa gather a palm branch that
they carve into long strips and weave into a rack (rō’äui). The ants are mixed in
water to the point of near death with a small stick for 20 minutes. Jeripa spits
some capi juice on the ants. One by one, about 60 ants are then woven into
the rack. They remain in the rack overnight to be pressed onto my body in the
morning. The build up is wonderful, and I find myself looking forward to the
pain of multiple ant bites, to suffering, surviving and becoming stronger, to
entering la roca.

Reciting a ‘Piaroa law’ Jeripa blesses a cigar for me to take back to my
home. ‘This cigar is to be smoked in Australia, in your land, and will protect
you on your journey, so that your family is safe and healthy. Harm will not
befall your household.’ Night falls and bats fly around us. Märitö most
frequently take the form of bats, and we must continuously keep them at bay.
We wave our *i’cha’ches*, a Piaroa shaman’s weapon of spiritual defense (made from the tusk of a feral pig), in aggressive circular motions accompanied by whoops, yells and hisses.\(^\text{12}\) The *märitô* leave, periodically returning to annoy us. ‘They are mocking us’, José-Luis says.

José-Luis proceeds to recite an oath taken by all young Piaroa shamans as they learn to acquire *märipa* and begin to cure. All initiates must agree that the powers of *märipa* are to be used to effect good: to understand social and individual problems and for the purpose of curing, and not be used to cause harm to others (by means of sorcery) or to take advantage of others for personal gain. José-Luis uses “say it” or “say something” to refer to the act of bewitching someone. For instance:

> If you visit other Piaroa and see a feather crown or necklace that looks beautiful, you must not touch it. Or if you visit another Piaroa place and see an animal (deer, bush turkey, toucan, armadillo), you must not touch it, just look at it. Also, if two young people want to marry, you can’t *say anything* to prevent them. You must not use your power to prevent two people from marrying just because you want the woman or dislike the man. When you find a woman who doesn’t want you you must not say anything to harm her or her family... You must not say anything to prevent another from having children. You must never be responsible for causing a woman or child to fall ill with blood, sorcery.

The oath deals with issues of jealousy and desire in interpersonal and economic relations. Shamanic powers are not to be used to disrupt functioning marriages, to interfere with a family’s reproductive life, or to be used to damage the foodstuffs of another. There are also numerous rules by which an initiate must abide as he navigates visions experienced during *märipa teui*. Many of these involve not touching particular objects, animals or people perceived in yopo hallucinations. Tseheru might appear as a beautifully body-painted woman and is not to be touched in this rapturous form. A shaman’s adornments (feather crowns, beautiful necklaces and crystals), representing knowledge, power and time in the infinite, and being some of the most complex and prestigious forms of Piaroa aesthetic expression, might also be manifestations of Tseheru, and must not be interfered with in yopo visions. To get too close to beautiful things is a dangerous temptation that a shaman must learn to resist. When participating in sorcery battles, competing shamans often set seductive traps. Evil can be presented as alluring beauty. Harm befalls the student who breaks these taboos, and those who fall for a shaman’s traps.

\(^{12}\) The *i’cha’che* talisman tusk does not originate from peccaries, the closest native animal to a pig found in the region, although it may once have been sourced from domesticated pig stock.
According to Oldham (1997: 236), māripa teui serve two primary functions: 'Firstly, to learn the rules, customs and responsibilities that make social life possible within Wothïha [Piaroa] society. Secondly, to acquire the conceptually dangerous knowledge that permits [the initiates] to become productive members of their communities.' As Grob and Dobkin de Rios (1992:122) have argued, completion of rigorous training and painful ordeals culminating in the controlled but intensive learning of moral codes undertaken during periods of hallucinogen-induced hyper-suggestibility serves to strengthen the initiate's psychological fortitude, and prepares these individuals for the assumption of adult responsibilities. Rites of suffering and guided hallucinogen use ground the initiates with moral and practical knowledge that prepare them for the spiritual and material rigours of life.

Jeripa passes the cup of capi around all the places on my body where I will take the yänäw, blessing the capi by blowing on it through a woody hollow reed (marana, of the Poaceae family). He blesses the yopo that we will later take by blowing tobacco smoke into the jar. He blesses the shaman's comb also by blowing tobacco smoke onto it. We begin to consume three small-gourd-cupfuls of capi each at half-hour intervals from 8:30pm to 2am. The acrid decoction kills my hunger and the chill of a wet night.

With this law and this taking of capi your head and heart will become strong like the skin of a sloth and you will be vested with the power of māripa... The power of this law is here in this capi. (Jeripa).

Jeripa leads a long song, lasting the entire evening, which concerns the preparation of plantains, sugar, salt and game food for safe consumption. José-Luis and I offer choral support. At dawn, capi juice is dabbed on my chest, back and arms and Jeripa presses the rack of ants onto each pectoral, each upper and lower arm, my upper back and forehead. Sixty ants bite like searing fire, but the pain does not last long. Jeripa and José-Luis also press the rack onto their arms and collect the ants back into a bottle to be released where they were collected. ‘Shamanes son muy arrechos [shamans are real tough, they love a bit of pain].’ José-Luis laughs, reveling in his controlled pain experience.

A variety of painful stimuli (burns, cold, injury, toxic shocks) leads to secretion of the hormone ACTH (adrenocorticotropic hormone), which causes stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system to collapse, resulting in a parasympathetic dominant state (Winkelman, 2000: 150). Physical and emotional stress can result in the release of endogenous opioids (Gellhorn 1969; Prince 1982). Extremely painful stimuli can result in the emergence of synchronised slow-wave potentials in the EEG stemming from direct stimulation of the hypothalamus hippocampal-septal area (Gellhorn & Loufbourrow 1963). A number of physical stimuli associated with shamanic activity (hyperstress of emotions, fasting, water restrictions, prolonged exercise, the social bonding associated with shamanic ritual), can also lead to
the endogenous release of opiates (Henry 1982). Driving the body to opioid release facilitates the proliferation of continued ASC through greater sensitivity to the whole gamut of physical, pharmacological and psychological stimuli that induce ASC. ‘Opiates’ slow wave effects increase susceptibility to driving influences from other induction procedures and contribute to the activation of the hypothalamic area, which receives projections from the pain receptors.’ (Winkelman 2000: 150). After fasting, 48 hours without sleep and having endured extreme pain, our systems were primed for the consumption of yopo. I was ready to enter la roca.

After I had taken yopo, José-Luis and Jeripa asked me what I had seen. As I entered the yopo visions I wanted to see what my teachers expected of me. Their cultural loading served as an ‘inner silent voice,’ coaxing my visions along a culturally-significant path (Johnston 1977: 229). I had rapturous visions of futures potential: of gaining work at American universities; of meeting an incredibly beautiful woman who would become my partner; of continuing to learn to use märipa; of writing a good thesis; of reconnecting with family and a couple of very special friends. I saw all these things and felt wonderful, for I believed that I would realise them. José-Luis had repeatedly told me that I would see the future and I certainly believed that I had. I also met a woman who had traveled from far away. She came wearing a traditional woven Piaroa backpack laden with corn, which she unloaded for me as a gift.

José-Luis not only guided me into forming and interpreting my roca visions in a culturally-valid way through weeks of preparation, but interpreted my roca visions in such a way that there would be no doubt in my mind that I had seen and felt what was expected of me: my future, and my entrance into the roca to meet with Tseheru. In my hypersuggestible state, the shamans were able to ‘inculcate culturally important moral systems and values’ onto my visions by telling me that the woman I saw was Tseheru, and that the corn she offered represented the knowledge of how to cure and sing (Grob & Dobkin de Rios 1992: 130). I described a place of immense beauty and light, and this was interpreted as hü, the roca’s inner space where Tseheru meets visitors. I came away from the experience believing that I had in fact met Tseheru and that she had in fact given me a great gift of knowledge. As has been demonstrated with reference to other initiatory rites, the elder officiants psychologically manipulated me in such a way that culturally valued results (in this case interpretation of a female figure in my visions as Tseheru) were achieved. The consumption of yopo during märipa teui rites is comparable to the use of ayahuasca as described by Grob who states that: ‘[u]ltimately the intent of the collective ayahuasca sessions is not necessarily to evoke visions from each tribal individual’s collective unconscious, but rather to assimilate and absorb the unconscious biographical personality structure into the cultural patterns of the visionary motifs.’ (Grob 1999: 222-3).

The Piaroa shamans would have been unimpressed if the culturally desired visions of entering the roca and meeting Tseheru were not attained.
Not achieving culturally valid visions would be met with one of two explanations: that fear is inhibiting the attainment of māripa; or that you have not taken enough yopo and must consume more. This is concordant with what Fernandez (1982) has argued with reference to the Fang of Gabon who ply youths with ever more iboga until the culturally-desired visions are attained. While some Fang have died in this process, José-Luis cites ‘craziness’, ‘people losing themselves’, ‘going mad’, ‘running around, screaming, crying, violent, furious’ as abreactions to the cultural loading, physical drains and hallucinogen ingestion involved at the spiritually-charged roca rituals of māripa teui. According to Zent (pers. com.) some individuals have apparently died as a result of yopo overdose.

The last thing we did before leaving the roca was comb our hair with the shaman’s special comb, used after important yopo ceremonies to clear the mind (and stimulate blood flow through the scalp, relieving one of potential post-yopo head throbs). To allow the initiate to come to terms with the visions experienced at the roca, the novice is not supposed to take yopo for three weeks following his māripa teai. Tobacco and capi restrictions also apply for a period of up to one week. José-Luis refers to these restrictions as ‘Piaroa laws.’ The apprentice must know his visions well and be able to reflect upon them sufficiently to understand how to plot a course of action that will open paths to the realisation of the futures perceived during this highest order of yopo intoxication.

Once you have been to the roca there is nothing higher. You can get there again in time with fasting, wasps, the stingray barb, but there is nothing higher.

Repetition of the intensive vision questing process can lead to an accumulation of more māripa, but will be experientially similar to the previous attempts. Immediately following māripa teai, however, one must relax and dwell on a visionary experience regarded as the highest, from where the most profound lessons can purportedly be attained.

Conclusions

Piaroa shamanic training is an ongoing process of refined experimentation with technologies of consciousness within a culture-specific mythological framework. Shamanic apprentices must learn how to use ASC derived from tobacco, capi and yopo to achieve types of understanding that can be applied to the perception of evil, divination, and the resolution of communitarian or individual adaptive problems. Fundamental to a student’s learning is comprehension of evil in its many manifestations and causations: as maladjusted behavioural patterns, psychological imbalances, social tensions, socially problematic emotional responses, hallucinatory imagery, and forest-dwelling spirits.
Direct experience of the parameters and technologies of consciousness employed by Piaroa shamans can lead to ethnographic locutions of the functional, experiential and ideological dynamics of Piaroa shamanism. While cultural loading conditions what one sees during visions, the neurobiological bases of shamanic practices are inter-culturally accessible, thus allowing for participatory understanding of an inner shamanic logic, that is how one sees.

While shamanic training is ongoing students must pass three stages of initiation to become independently practising shamans: ants, wasps, and the stingray barb. Each of these initiatory ordeals involves an extended build-up of intensive cultural loading through fast-paced hallucinatory tests, dietary and sexual restrictions, and the learning of ethical codes and prayers, and culminates in the initiate having to prove his psychic strength through the controlled administration of pain. Successful completion of these painful ordeals facilitates a breakthrough to a higher order of consciousness manipulation and culture-specific mytho-historical knowledge.

Abstract

This article gives an overview of key components of the Piaroa shamanic training and initiation complex. While anthropologists have given accounts of how Piaroa people describe the initiatory rites undertaken by shamans, the ongoing training involved in preparing for initiation has received comparatively little attention. Piaroa shamanic training is ongoing, and punctuated by three painful initiatory ordeals. Piaroa shamans specialise in the use of plant hallucinogens to attain visions interpreted according to a dynamic matrix of psycho-social forces and mytho-historical templates. Direct experience of the parameters and technologies of consciousness employed by Piaroa shamans can lead to ethnographic locutions of the functional, experiential and ideological dynamics of Piaroa shamanism. While cultural loading conditions what one sees during visions, the neurobiological bases of shamanic practices are cross-culturally accessible and allow for participatory understanding of an inner shamanic logic, that is how one sees.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una visión general de los componentes claves de la capacitación e iniciación shamánica de los Piaroa. Mientras algunos antropólogos han informado acerca de cómo los Piaroa describen los ritos de iniciación, han prestado comparativamente poca atención al entrenamiento previo a la iniciación. El entrenamiento viene marcado por tres pruebas de iniciación dolorosas. Los shamanes Piaroa se especializan en el uso de plantas alucinógenas, para alcanzar visiones que se interpretan de acuerdo a una matriz dinámica de fuerzas psico-sociales y de patrones mitológicos-históricos.
La experiencia directa de los parámetros y de las tecnologías de conocimiento utilizados por los shamanes Piaroa, pueden llevar a la locución etnográfica de la dinámica funcional, experimental e ideológica del shamanismo. Mientras la carga cultural condiciona lo que uno ve en las visiones, las bases neuro-biológicas de las prácticas shamánicas son asequibles a través de varias culturas, y permiten una comprensión participativa de la lógica interna shamánica, es decir, de cómo se ve.

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