



The role of icaros as therapeutic tools in psycho-emotional healing: A study of musical experiences of traditional Amazonian medicine



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Background

Traditional systems of medicine are practiced by indigenous groups throughout the Amazon basin, using plants for healing. In Peru, *vegetalismo*, a form of Traditional Amazonian Medicine (TAM), is practiced by mestizo cultures.

Icaros are songs sung by a healer (*curandero*) during the ritual practice of TAM.

- ◆ Considered a powerful healing tool
- ◆ Simple strophic forms and pentatonic melodies
- ◆ Can be accompanied with a leaf shaker (*chacapa*)
- ◆ Understood to be transmitted or received from plants
- ◆ May be used for specific healing functions



Chacapa.

Photo courtesy of Takiwasi

Ayahuasca ('vine of the soul') is a botanical decoction (usually B.Caapi and P.Viridis) central to TAM. Used for healing and divination, it is psychoactive; producing altered states of consciousness (ASC).

Aims

- ◆ Phenomenological description of experiences of icaros heard during a ritual of TAM
- ◆ Present findings relevant to music therapy (MT)
- ◆ Contribute to knowledge base on culturally diverse uses of music as therapeutic agent
- ◆ Facilitate for further interdisciplinary study

Methodology

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, Larkin 2009).

- ◆ Audio recording of TAM ceremony
- ◆ Semi-structured interviews conducted 36 - 58 hours post-ceremony
- ◆ Isolation of song-related data
- ◆ Analysis of 'primary' and interpretive responses

Participants

Six healthy French-speaking adults attending Takiwasi centre for a self-development retreat

- ◆ Recruited post-clinical screening
- ◆ 5 male, 1 female, aged 30-60
- ◆ No psychiatric diagnosis

| Results Experiences of icaros: Meta-categories A-D, phenomenological themes 1.1 - 6.3 | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| A: Psycho-physical and psycho-emotional | B: Non-ordinary | C: Cognitive-psychological | D: Spiritual and religious |
| PT (Phenomenological themes) 1.1 -1.5 | PT.2.1-2.5 | PT 3.1, 4.1 - 4.2, 5.1 | PT 6.1 -6.3 |
| <p>A: Psycho-physical and psycho-emotional</p> <p><i>'Before the song, maybe I had some sadness here and some anger there. [When] the song appears, these sensations melt [...]</i> (H: 1.1)</p> <p><i>'One song which talks about the heart is 'Abrete corazón' [...] it's profound; it means listen to your emotions, open your heart. You're really in your emotions' (W: 1.5)</i></p> | <p>B: Non-ordinary</p> <p><i>'as if the songs were being sent to different places [...] they went downwards or more into the stomach, or more into the heart'</i> (U: 2.1)</p> <p><i>'each time it was a new song I had an outburst of a new colour [...] not just a single colour, more a kind of [...] colourful theme [of] moving dancing colours'</i> (L: 2.3)</p> | <p>C: Cognitive-psychological</p> <p><i>'it's a guide when you get lost [...] you listen to the songs, [...] and they bring you where you need to go, like inside your body, it's very introspective'</i> (S: 3.1)</p> <p><i>'I don't think any more because [...] it's as if the song pushed out the thoughts'</i> (U: 5.1)</p> | <p>D: Spiritual and religious</p> <p><i>'like they are coming from another realm... very far away' and 'higher'</i> (L: 6.1)</p> <p><i>'That song for me is feeling the presence of the holy spirit, it's feeling the presence of Christ'</i> (W: 6.3)</p> |

Preliminary conclusions

- ◆ Songs guided experiences of the TAM ceremony, serving as an orientating point of focus
- ◆ Healing experiences were highly individualized
- ◆ Participants considered the songs 'essential' to the ceremony
- ◆ Meaning-making around the impact of songs was culturally-situated
- ◆ Qualities of song and singer impacted on experiences
- ◆ Songs were experienced as mediators of therapeutic interaction

Future directions

- ◆ How do experiences of specific songs relate to medical and psychological history?
- ◆ Could icaros / other aspects of shamanic music be applied in other contexts?
- ◆ Further investigate aspects of experience that have meaning in Amazonian cosmology



Don José singing with *chacapa*

Photo courtesy of Takiwasi