

# **The role of icaros as therapeutic tools in psycho-emotional healing: An interpretive phenomenological analysis of musical experiences during the ceremonial practice of traditional Amazonian medicine (TAM) at Takiwasi**

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## **Final report for MTC small grant award**

### **Study aims:**

The aim of this project was to generate a clear phenomenological account of participant experiences of traditional Amazonian healing songs, or 'icaros' heard during a ritual healing ceremony of traditional Amazonian medicine (TAM) held at the Takiwasi Centre for the Treatment of Addiction and Research into Traditional Medicines, Peru. The study aimed to generate detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of healing songs; to explore how they function as therapeutic tools within the ritual practice of traditional Amazonian medicine, and to present findings with relevance for music therapy.

**Planned length of project:** September 2017 to dissertation submission, September 2018

**Actual length of project:** Main phase complete. Ongoing plans for journal publication and future collaboration.

## Summary of research

This study aimed to elucidate the experiences of healing songs or 'icaros' heard during a traditional Amazonian healing ritual. The research was supervised by Prof. L. Bunt at UWE and Dr. M. Politi, PhD, Scientific director of the Takiwasi centre. Supervisors have expertise in both qualitative and quantitative methodology and were able to give cross-disciplinary advice.

Following medical and psychological screening, participants attended a night-time TAM ritual which involved the delivery of more than 60 icaros sung by 'curanderos' (traditional healers) and centre staff. During the ritual, participants ingested the ethnobotanical plant decoction ayahuasca, which induces an altered state of consciousness (ASC).

The sample of 6 participants were interviewed 36 - 58 hours post-ritual on all aspects of the lived experience of songs heard. Answers were transcribed, coded and subject to categorization and interpretive phenomenological analysis. Song-related data was integrated into a meta-structure allowing for interdisciplinary interpretation.

## Results

Experiences relating directly to, or undergone during, the songs were classified into four meta-domains:

- 1) **Psycho-physical and psycho-emotional responses** including  
*Tears and perceived help with emotional processing*  
*Release of 'negative energy'*
  
- 1) **'Non-ordinary' experience related to the ASC** including  
*Auditory-to-visual synesthesia: (visual imagery associated with songs)*  
*Songs experienced in different parts of body / 'entering' the body*
  
- 1) **Cognitive-psychological experience** including  
*Songs assisting psychological orientation within the ASC*  
*Help escaping ruminative thoughts*
  
- 1) **Spiritual and religious experience** including  
*A sense of non-language dependent, universal meaning*  
*Experiences of spiritual or religious significance*

Preliminary results suggest that experiences of songs were highly individualized in relation to psychological and personal factors, and that songs were experienced as an essential, guiding feature of the ritual, acting as powerful mediators of therapeutic interaction between participant and healer.

The study offers preliminary indicators on the musico-therapeutic potential (and risk factors) of TAM, and of the conjunction between songs / music and the ASC induced by ayahuasca during TAM rituals. It offers a culturally-situated comparator to recent studies into the therapeutic potential of music and ASCs (i.e. Kaelen, M. 2018).

## Benefits & dissemination

UWE and the Takiwasi Centre benefit from an ongoing professional association and the possibility of future collaboration. Participants were able to safely reflect on their experience and its significance to their psycho-emotional healing. The researcher has benefitted from an expanded professional network and research opportunities.

The music therapy profession benefits from increased insight into a musical healing tradition which has the potential of becoming a rich interdisciplinary field of music & health research, and a point of departure for clinically-oriented studies. The public benefits from information enabling informed decision-making on the musico-therapeutic aspect of TAM as a non-Western health modality.

In May 2018 the project featured in a short film about Takiwasi's research:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDSlfcO11al&feature=share>

The project was presented at Takiwasi Centre in September 2018 and in an oral and poster

presentation at the MTC conference in May 2019. Plans are underway for publication and for future collaboration with the Takiwasi centre.

**Funding:**

The MTC was the sole external funder of the project.

Total project cost:	£2750
MTC grant:	£1332
Total self-funded:	£1418

**MTC grant expenditure:**

ITEM	GBP
<b>Flight</b>	609.37
<b>Accommodation in Tarapoto 3 months</b>	
2 * 400 soles	194.62
1 * 650 soles	158.13
<b>Communications &amp; equipment</b>	
Equipment	91.00
Phone, internet	29.19
Materials	14.70
<b>Transport in Peru</b>	
in Tarapoto: 5 soles / day *90	109.48
Coach travel – Lima *1	19.46
<b>Daily living expenses</b>	106.05
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£1332.00</b>