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**Ancestral Medicine on the Rise**

Reemergence of ancestral medicine and spirituality in Saraguro, and its transformative effects.

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the revival of pre-Columbian ancestral medicine and spirituality in Saraguro, Ecuador, catalyzed by a minority within the indigenous population of Saraguro. In the thesis, I look at how this resurgence is affecting and contributing to a meaning change towards their cultural identity by looking at local, global and historical influences. The methods I have employed consists of interviews, participant observation and using film as a tool. The empirical data is based on a four-month fieldwork in the community of Ilincho in Saraguro where I stayed with a local family that has been and still is pioneering the revival process of the ancestral spirituality and medicine despite the strong stance of Catholicism in Saraguro. By staying with this family, that forms part of a group of Saraguros that are on the path of resurrecting their ancestral medicine and spirituality, I have investigated the use of hallucinogenic medicinal plants in ceremonial contexts, mainly the San Pedro cactus native to the area. I will argue that the resurrection of the ancestral medicine and spirituality is counteracting the acculturation that has historically taken place since the arrival of the Spanish colonizers, as well as the homogenizing pressure currently taking place due to globalization. I further argue that this resurrection is leading to contestation and reevaluation of European cultural exports such as neo liberal capitalism as well as the bio medical perspective on health. The scope of the thesis mainly encompasses the movement of the before mentioned minority group within Saraguro, but as I will argue, the resurrection of the ancestral medicine and spirituality is connected with a process stretching all throughout the American continent.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

During the Spanish colonization of the Americas the native peoples were subjected to a comprehensive process of acculturation as spiritual practices, languages and their cosmologies were attempted driven away by the colonizers. The ones who refused to leave their native spirituality behind and become Catholic were often punished and sometimes killed for being involved in the practices that the colonizers considered to be related to something of a heathen nature. In several parts of the Andes, ancient healing practices, including the ingestion of psychotropic plants had been utilized by the indigenous people for spiritual and medicinal purposes since the onset of the great Andean civilizations. With the arrival of the colonizers however, this ancient medicine and the people facilitating these practices were thoroughly prosecuted as it came to be associated with witchery by the Spanish which drove the whole phenomena underground for five centuries.

Today however, roughly 500 years after the arrival of the Spanish in South America, a revitalization process is taking place all over the Ecuadorian Andes as pre-Columbian languages, cosmologies, and material culture are reemerging. What has been actively repressed and stigmatized as sinful and shameful by the Spanish is rapidly transforming into cultural emblems associated with pride and strength. The reasons for this development are complex and many; the liberating and connecting force of the internet and the current and historical political situation are surely central reasons. However, I will investigate a less obvious, but nonetheless impactful element that is contributing to this development, which is the current reemergence of the pre-Columbian medicine.

During my four-month fieldwork conducted in 2019 living with an indigenous family of Saraguro ethnicity I found that the traditional use of the psychotropic cactus ‘San Pedro’ is reemerging within a small group of the community. Based on my experience living with this family, I will in this text argue that the reemergence of psychotropic plant medicine is catalyzing a meaning change towards pre-Columbian traditions, thoughts, healing and spirituality by encouraging revitalization and acting as a counterforce to the acculturation that has, and is, taking place due to the colonization and contemporary globalization.

## Chapter 2: Presenting the field

### 2.1 Saraguro

‘Saraguro’ refers to both the indigenous group and canton with the same name. Although the canton bears the name of the indigenous group there is also a significant portion living in Saraguro that are mestizos, that is, people of combined European and indigenous American descent. The indigenous group pertains to the Kichwa community of Ecuador and is located in the highlands north in the province of Loja. The population by 2010 was estimated at 30 183 by INEC (insituto nacional de estadística y censos). The canton of Saraguro stretches out over an area of 1080 Km<sup>2</sup> and is dominated by a mountainous terrain with altitudes ranging from 1000 to 3800 meters (Gutiérrez, Becerra, Fernández, Jiménez, 2015). The canton is further divided into 11 parishes, one of which is also called ‘Saraguro’ which contains the capital city. The most central element in their economy has been subsistence farming, although many has also been raising cattle since the beginning of the last century which aided them in entering more into the cash economy (Ogburn, 2007). Like most of the indigenous groups in Ecuador, Saraguro has also been subject to acculturation since the arrival of the Europeans and most of them are therefore adhering to the Roman Catholic church and the majority speak Spanish as their first language.



**Figure 1:** Map of Ecuador, illustrating Saraguro's position in the southern region. Armijos, C., Cota, I., González, S. (2014)



The Saraguro people is however considered to be among the most well organized indigenous groups in Ecuador (Andrade, Mosquera, Armijos, 2017) and display a rich array of Pre-Columbian cultural emblems like their native dressing, gastronomy, music, dance etc. that they are eager to demonstrate. This way it is a rather clear divide between the mestizos and the indigenous Saraguro, as the latter have long braided hair, short pants, often wear black and wear their characteristic hats.

Although the indigenous Saraguro separate themselves in these ways they are also thoroughly connected with the Ecuadorian society as they are situated along the Pan American highway that runs through the canton. This is reflected in their increasingly modern lifestyles where many are avid computer and internet users and for many, agricultural jobs are being substituted for careers in law, education, medicine etc. (Ogburn, 2007). The majority of the Saraguro are devout Catholics, however there is a growing number of atheists among the younger generation as well as a small but growing group of people adhering to the Andean spirituality.

## **2.2 Historical Context**

The process of the formation of the Saraguro ethnicity is rather complex and there still exists scholarly uncertainty about the true origin of the Saraguro. The most accepted theory however is that they originate from peoples further south in the Andes that were forced to resettle in the south of Ecuador by the Incas (Andrade, Armijos, Mosquera, 2017). After conquering Saraguro between 1463 to 1471 the Inca went on to impose their administrative, economic and religious systems and most importantly instituted their ‘resettlement project’ (Ogburn, 2007). This project often referred to as “ethnic mobilization” entailed the transfer of ethnic groups residing in faraway geographical locations within the Inca empire to new locations with the aim to “pacify newly subjugated peoples by breaking them into smaller, more isolated groups, over whom control could be maintained by severely curtailing their ability to organize resistance to their conquerors” (Ogburn, 2007, p.138).

Despite the great success of the Inca empire, their rule would eventually be thoroughly overthrown when faced with the Spanish colonizers which came after Columbus had opened the path for European colonization in 1492. This colonization led to a comprehensive subjugation of the native peoples of South America which led to one of the largest genocides in modern history. As Linda A. Newson states in her book “Life and Death in Early Colonial Ecuador” (1995), “The most commonly cited causes of native depopulation are the

introduction of Old World diseases; the systemic slaughter and ill treatment of the Indians, often referred to as the Black Legend; the methods used by the Spanish to control and exploit native populations; and the impact of commercial forms of production on Indian economies and societies” (Newson, 1995, p.3). Researchers largely agree that the most prominent of these reasons was the introduction of Old World diseases which led to epidemics that the natives had no immunity against and could kill of one-third to one-half of the population in an area (Newson, 1995, p.4). The colonization, which bears more resemblance to a traditional raid led to a considerable enrichment of the Spanish Crown, however at the cost of countless Native American lives and suffering. The desolation of the Native peoples was however eventually somewhat stifled by the Spanish Crown as there emerged a need for a subordinate labor force as well as the Pope wanting to convert the Natives to Christianity (Newson, 1995, p.9).

### **2.3 Inca-ism**

Although Saraguro was for a relatively short period under Inca rule, perhaps 60 years, it becomes apparent when one enters Saraguro that their Inca roots is a central element in the construction of their contemporary ethnic identity. This phenomenon of indigenous Andean groups identifying with the Inca culture has been called “Inca-ism” and has been going on for quite some time (Ogburn, 2007). In Saraguro, this is expressed in many ways and becomes particularly apparent when entering the capital city of Saraguro where the central park has a big Inca statue surrounded by the many businesses and restaurants with Inca names.

The local school called ‘Inka Samana’ served as an illustration of the influence of the Inca culture in the community where I stayed as the walls were covered in paintings of Inca leaders and warriors. Another telling example is how many of the Saraguro have started using Inca names instead of traditional Spanish names. This was quite the case in the family I lived with where the three sons in the family were called Atic, Inti and Amawta which all originate from the Kichwa language<sup>1</sup> the Inca’s brought with them. One of the major reasons for the emergence of this shared symbolic expression of Inca-ism in many Andean indigenous groups is that ties to the Inca tradition marked a common difference from the Spanish which became

<sup>1</sup> ‘Kichwa is the Ecuadorian version of the Andean language ‘Quechua’. Although very similar there are small variations between the two.

important as resentment for the Spanish oppression was growing after their colonialization (Rowe, 1982).

At the same time as the before mentioned Inca-ism and cultural revitalization currently going on in Saraguro, I also noticed during my stay that there are many of the indigenous that are distancing themselves from their ethnical roots and actively seek to become more similar to the hegemonic culture in Ecuador. Although attempts have been made to conserve the Kichwa language by incorporating bilingual education, very few of the younger generation speak the Kichwa language fluently and many are more interested in learning English as a second language instead of conserving their Kichwa. A rather clear sign of the acculturation that is taking place is in the way a growing number of the younger generation are cutting their emblematic long braided hair, and thus metaphorically cutting their tie with their roots.

## **2.4 Curanderismo**

A concept that will be necessary to elaborate on before going further is the ‘curanderismo’. The term “shamanism” which is often used today when discussing different forms of healing conducted by indigenous doctors and magico-religious practitioners was invented by anthropologists that wanted to classify these incomprehensible practices done by so called “primitive” peoples (Narby, 1998, p.14). From the beginnings of the twentieth century and onward whether these people were found in Indonesia, Uganda, the Arctic or Amazonia and regardless if they played drums, used plant decoctions and/or casted spells, they were all referred to as “shamans” (Narby, 1998, p.15). There will however be considerable differences between a person in the Amazon specializing in curing with a hallucinogenic brew native to their region and a person on the Siberian tundra inducing trance through a type of drumming. To compare two such different traditions and refer to them all as ‘shamans’ is an oversimplification and are clearly lacking in accurate phenomenological comparisons.

Although a still generalizing term, however a more accurate and useful one to utilize when referring to folk healing traditions in South America is the ‘curandero’<sup>2</sup>. The term ‘curandero’

<sup>2</sup> However, it is necessary to mention that there also exists considerable differences between folk healers in the South American continent. An Ayahuascero (person specializing in working with the hallucinogenic brew Ayahuasca) for example can differentiate greatly to a Wachumero which specializes in the use of the San Pedro cactus.

stems from the Spanish verb ‘curar’, meaning to cure. As Douglas Sharon writes in his book “Wizard of the Four Winds” about a Peruvian folk healer, “Curanderos are the contemporary counterparts of the pre-Columbian magico-religious healers who were highly skilled in performing cures with herbs and simples” (Sharon, p.2, 1978). He goes on to write that the modern curandero has a rich knowledge of curing with plants, which entail the use of plants with hallucinogenic properties which “serve as catalytic agents for his psychic powers” (Sharon, p.2, 1978).

As the ancient practice of curanderismo was forced underground by the Catholic church and the law since the Spanish Conquest (Sharon, 1978, p.3) this type of healing had to be done far away from other people, often in secret as it has been associated with witchery. One of the reasons that lead to the repression of the curanderos by the Spanish was the evangelization process of the Natives which happened all throughout Latin America which entailed considering the native spirituality as idolatry which went against the Catholic religion (Cuetos, 1996, pp.7-8). Another important reason for this is that the curandero was challenging to differentiate from the ‘brujo’ or sorcerer, as he is considered to be able to perform the same feats as the curandero, but in addition to this can practice witchcraft that can cause damaging health effects and even death (Sharon, 1978, p.3).

## **2.5 The Yachak**

To particularize further from the term ‘curandero’, the healers knowledgeable of the curative properties of plants, animals, and/or minerals are locally known as the ‘Yachak’ or ‘Hampiyachakkuna’ in many places in the Ecuadoaran Andes as well as in Saraguro (Andrade, Mosquera, Armijos, 2017). One of the most common sacred plants used by the yachak in Saraguro is the psychotropic ‘San Pedro’ cactus also known as *Aguacola*, *Wachuma* or *San Pedrillo* (Armijos, Cota, Gonzales, 2014). The San Pedro cactus is a columnar cactus of the genus *Cereus* and its use has a long and uninterrupted history that can be traced back to the onset of the Peruvian civilization (Sharon, 1978, p.39). The main psychoactive proponent in the cactus is the active alkaloid *mescaline* (Pummangura, McLaughlin, Schiffendecker, 1982). During the magical-religious ceremonies facilitated by the yachak, the San Pedro cactus is consumed as a beverage that allows the yachak to recognize the patient’s condition and find out what treatment is needed for the healing (Armijos, Cota, González, 2014). Ingestion of the beverage can cause a purging from the body

which can include diarrhea and vomiting, in addition it can also give patients an emotional release which is considered a form of spiritual healing (Armijos, Cota, Gonzáles, 2014).

## **2.6 Constitution change of 2008**

Although the practice of curanderismo was driven underground and had to be done in silence for centuries, it has survived up until the present. The year 2008 however marked an important change towards the practice of curanderismo after voters in Ecuador approved a new and progressive constitution. This new constitution sought to curtail the way the wealth was shifted from marginalized peoples to elite corporate interests due to the neoliberal policies as well as benefitting the indigenous populations in the country by decolonizing the country's political structures (Becker, 2011, pp.47-48). In the constitution, in chapter four, article number 12, it is clearly stated that the indigenous populations of Ecuador have the right to practice its ancestral knowledge and traditional medicine and that all forms of appropriation of their knowledge, innovation and practices are prohibited. Thus, after the law was passed it was no longer a legal need to do the rituals and ceremonies with the plant medicines like San Pedro in secret.

## **2.7 Ilincho**

On a hill overlooking the capital city of Saraguro the indigenous community of 'Ilincho' resides at an altitude of 3000 meters. Ilincho is a peaceful indigenous village dominated by green fields with cattle grazing. This is where I stayed during my fieldwork and gathered most of the data this thesis will build upon. Ilincho is one of the 9 communities within in the Saraguro parish and per Luis Chalan which I stayed with during my fieldwork, there are around 100 families residing there.

In the center of the village lies the Inca Samana school with a few family own 'tiendas', small shops that are built in to some of the homes where one can buy bread, milk, eggs etc. as well as basic household necessities. Most of the houses there differentiate themselves from the modern architecture in the capital city and are built in Saraguro indigenous style with accompanied rainbow flags symbolizing affiliation with the Andean nation. Most of the homes here also have their own 'chacra' which is a field where corn, beans, melons etc. is cultivated. It also becomes apparent when entering Ilincho that this community is quite politically dedicated as many of the houses has posters hanging outside urging people to vote for different municipal leaders, which of the indigenous leader Abel Sarango covered the

majority during my stay. The Saraguro indigenous have had little influence over the municipal government until recently (Ogburn, 2007) however in the last election before my arrival, Abel Sarango as the first person of indigenous ethnicity had managed to win the position as the municipal leader.

## **2.8 Inti Wasi**

Here in Ilincho I was fortunate enough to stay at the family owned hostel and touristic center 'Inti Wasi Centro Turistico'. The name 'Inti Wasi' comes from the Kichwa language and can be translated to 'house of the sun'. The hostel was founded by the family Chalan Lozano in 2001 as a means to make a livelihood out of their pursuit and enthusiasm for learning about and sharing what they refer to as ancestral knowledge and traditions. In the past 20 years, the family has in fact been on a journey to revive traditions regarding Andean and Saraguro cuisine, medicine, rituals, credence and customs which they have promoted through their touristic center. This revitalization process has made ripple effects not only throughout Ilincho, but in other communities in Saraguro as well. As well as a hostel, Inti Wasi includes a restaurant, a spiritual center and a sauna installation, all run with a strong emphasis on authentic Saraguro traditions.

With the increasing tourism in Saraguro, there is a pretty constant influx of tourists from Ecuador, but there are also frequently international visitors arriving from places like Europe, the US, Canada and so forth. Inti Wasi also has a large house used frequently by an indigenous dance group run by the daughter in the family where the family holds occasional presentations about their culture as well as rituals and other celebrations.

My main part of departure in this thesis will build upon data I have gathered living with the family of six that are running Inti Wasi. However I have also gathered data from interaction with their extended family and friends that they introduced me to. In addition to this, I will draw upon encounters with other people from Ilincho and other communities in Saraguro with a few exceptions. I was put in contact with these people directly and indirectly by the help of the family, mainly in contexts like healing ceremonies and Andean celebrations and festivals.

## **2.9 Key concepts**

Before proceeding further with the thesis, I will briefly have to define a few concepts that will be used throughout the following part of the text.

### *Ancestral Medicine and Knowledge*

When using the word ‘ancestral’ what is referred to is the Pre-Columbian era, which is to say the period before the arrival of the Spanish to South America some 500 years ago. Although largely based on Andean cultures, as far as I understood it during my stay, when speaking about ancestral medicine, spirituality and knowledge, it is not necessarily pointing to one specific tradition. It can also be a general term used to refer to the multitude of knowledge, spirituality and healing practices that have existed among the indigenous peoples and civilizations in the Pre-Columbian era. Often it was pointed to the Inca civilization when using this term, but not exclusively as it was also used when referring to knowledge and practices with roots in other indigenous groups and civilizations in Pre-Columbian Latin America.

### *Neo Liberal Capitalism*

A term I will be using frequently in the later parts of this thesis is the “neo liberal capitalism”. This refers to the form of capitalism widespread in the contemporary world with increased tendencies of privatization, liberalization and deregulation.

### *The Reductionist Scientific Worldview*

With reductionist scientific worldview I refer to the hegemonic model of science based on objectively creating and testing theories to gain understanding of different phenomena. This worldview has its roots in the Age of Enlightenment in Europe and entails the procedure where scientists attempt to reduce complex systems into smaller parts to make sense of their complexity (Cheung, 2008).

### *The Occidental and ‘Western’*

In the contemporary globalized world, the notion of what is considered as the ‘Western’ or ‘Occidental’ world is increasingly less obvious than it was before the globalizing events like the fall of the Berlin wall and the world wide spread of international free trade and cheap information technology that have led to a distribution of all things previously considered ‘Occidental’ or ‘Western’ to all corners of the world. In the contemporary world, it is increasingly difficult to find places where, brands like Coka Cola and Apple as well as ideologies like the reductionist scientific worldview and neoliberal capitalism is not common. Ecuador, is no exception, and even though it is geographically situated far away from the

where these ideas and brands were developed and established, it is nonetheless fundamentally integrated in the culture.

Considering this, the ‘Occidental’ might not be a fruitful term to be utilizing in a contemporary anthropological discourse in 2020. However, as the term was frequently used by my informants, I find it counterproductive to circumnavigate. To use the term however it is necessary to clarify the emic and etic conceptualization that it builds upon. The way the term ‘Occidental’ is used in an emic way is of course an interesting discussion in it itself and something that it is difficult for me as an outsider to fully know. However, I do perceive it to at least entail, although not be limited to, the reductionist scientific worldview as well as the neoliberal capitalism, which becomes rather clear in the context. When I use it in an etic way, I also point towards the same ideologies, however also the value systems, products, consumerism and lifestyle that originate from mainly Western Europe and North America.

### *Cosmology*

In their book, *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spenser suggests cosmology to signify “...the theory of the universe as an ordered whole, and of the general laws which govern it.” (Barnard & Spenser, 2002, p.129). The term cosmology can however be somewhat ambiguous as it can differ slightly whether one uses it in a philosophical way, an anthropological way, or in regards to physics and astronomy. In social-anthropology however the word has often been used in regards to religion (Barnard & Spenser, 2002, p.129). When using the word in the context of this thesis it is mostly in relationship with the Andean Cosmology which is a more than a spiritual or religious belief. It also encompasses a specific way of relating to time, nature, the cosmos, other people and more. This cosmology also suggests specific ways of approaching such things as health, social organization and agricultural practices.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

In this chapter I will be giving an overview of the methodological aspects of my research process. The main methods I employed in the research have been participant observation, interviews and using camera as a research tool. I will first be discussing each of these techniques and then end with a reflection on some ethical considerations of the research project.



### **3.1 Participant Observation**

The first and perhaps most important method I will be discussing will be ‘participant observation’, which is referring to the method of immersing oneself in the context of the research topic and participate in and observe the daily life of the people one is staying with.

### **3.2 Reflexivity**

One of the great challenges of modern anthropological research has been the issue of reflexivity. With reflexivity, we are talking about the anthropologists’ positioning in relation to the social phenomena he is researching. In his book “Being Ethnographic” (2010), Raymond Madden writes about the importance of reflexive considerations for successful ethnographic research. When the ethnographer himself is the central research tool and the methodological assessor, claims of ‘scientific’ validity requires reflections on the ethnographers’ subjective influence on the research process (Madden, 2010, p.22). Although complete scientific objectivity is hardly possible, by reflecting upon his own subjective influence on the research such as but not limited to, his own socio-cultural upbringing, his education, interests, education, gender and personal history, he can nevertheless increase the scientific validity of his research. Another important reflexive consideration is to remember that what one is looking for when conducting a research project will also in a way color and influence what one is seeing.

Reflexivity is however not limited to the researchers own subjectivity. It also extends to the people he is researching and their own subjectivity must always be taken in account. As Madden writes, the informants will never forget that the recorder located in the anthropologists’ body is always on and this will influence the informants to a certain degree no matter how comfortable they feel with her presence (Madden, 2010, p.67).

An important reflexive aspect that has been relevant to consider in this project is the fact that I come from Europe. This poses several challenges both regarding research and representation in this context.

One aspect of this is that the very understanding that I brought with me on relevant topics such as health, nature and reality, is colored by my education rooted in a culture that operates with a reductionist scientific worldview. Some of the ideas I was introduced to during my fieldwork, go beyond this paradigm. When I try to represent these ideas, I neither hold them as true, nor untrue, but have chosen to present them in such a way that I can try to convey the

emic understanding of them to the best of my ability. When encountering some of these ideas it was at times difficult for me to grasp their full meaning as they are rooted in an understanding that go beyond that of the limits of my own paradigm. However, to avoid ethnocentrism I find it necessary to emphasize that I do not make any claims that these ideas are less valid just because they do not comply with the reductionist scientific worldview. I see them rather as highly interesting ideas which must be seen in the context of another cultural interpretation, no less valid than the interpretation of the reductionist scientific worldview.

Another important aspect to consider is that I come from a modern Europe, which has shared roots with the European colonial powers that conquered and oppressed the culture of the people I was staying with for five centuries. Even though there are tremendous differences between contemporary and 16th-century Europe, I saw it as important to distance myself from the idea of 'the white man from Europe' as this of course can trigger certain cultural stereotypes. Even though I would do what I could to distance myself from this stereotype during my fieldwork, the fact still remained that I have a North European appearance and come from a European country. This became especially relevant since I was staying with a family that was very aware of the European oppression and all the damage it has caused for their people. There was however a surprising aspect of my cultural heritage that came to my aid. Namely my connection with the Viking culture as a Norwegian. I was told by Inti, one of the sons in the family, that the Vikings had come to South America before the conquistadors. Inti was eager to discuss the Viking culture with me, and said he was pleased to meet a person from 'the North'. As opposed to the conquistadors, the Vikings when visiting South America had been traders acting in a respectable way with the people they had encountered he told me. Whether all this is true or not, this reputation acted to my advantage, and helped to distance me from the detested Spanish conquistadors.

### **3.3 Going native**

The term 'going native' or 'going bush' points to a situation where the anthropologist in a sense have given up on the role of researcher and rather have become part of the culture where he is conducting his research (Sluka & Robben, 2007). Although fully assimilating into the culture one is attempting to understand better, and maybe even becoming accepted into this culture can be a very enriching experience, 'going native' is not ethnography. To be able to do good ethnography one should attempt to get close, but not too close. As Madden writes "Being close allows for the ethnographic authority of 'being there' to be parlayed into the text

(the emic perspective), while remaining ‘not to close’ allows for the authority of the critical expert to be present in the text (the etic perspective)” (Madden, 2010, p.79).

In my own fieldwork experience, finding the right balance between closeness and distance proved to be more challenging than I had expected. In the beginning of the fieldwork, the distance required came natural by itself since I felt like a stranger confused by the differentness of the culture I found myself in. Another element of this was the obvious difficulty one faces when attempting to suddenly live close to complete strangers. However, after having dined with the family every day, living in the same house as them, being invited along on numerous rituals and social gatherings as well as having been taken care of after a sudden hospitalization, the closeness had increased considerably towards the later stages of the fieldwork. As I was getting more and more close, I noticed how my own thinking was more and more affected by the cultural universe I was living in. This helped me to delve deeper into the meaning world of the people I was staying with. However, upon returning to my own country, ready to write up some of the data I had gathered I found it challenging to come back to the more neutral position I had before going into the field. After diving further and further into the meaning world of the culture I had stayed with, I resurfaced at the end as an ever so slightly different person. As some of the experiences I had experienced were difficult to assimilate into the paradigm I had before going into the field, I had to widen my perspective to be able to assimilate them into my understanding.

### **3.4 Further thoughts on participant observation**

When conducting fieldwork, the anthropologist often go into the field with some general questions in mind. Having formulated such questions beforehand enabled me to focus my attention on some key areas, and narrow down my scope to notice data that was relevant to my research in the overwhelming amount of new experience and knowledge that comes with suddenly being immersed in a foreign culture.

However, these questions are very often altered or superseded by others as the fieldwork progresses, and this can sometimes lead the anthropologist to a wholly new line of inquiry (Macdougall, 2019, pp.7-8). In my own fieldwork, I did most of the formal interviews towards the end of my fieldwork, as I by then sensed I had a better idea of what questions would be relevant for the research to ask. In the first three months of the fieldwork, I would of course also ask a lot of questions, but these functioned more as explorative questions that would lead me to the questions I would more formally ask later in interviews.

A key strength I found with doing participant observation was that it allowed me to discover a lot of contextual data and notice details that I previously had not even considered could play into the scope of my research. However effective this method is at immersing the anthropologist in information and data, I found that it can almost be a bit chaotic and it's a real risk of losing oneself in the ocean of data one encounters. To navigate all this information and work towards a scientific understanding of it, it would thus be necessary to do formal interviews with a number of different persons to single in on some concrete findings.

### **3.5 Interviews**

The second methodological tool that was utilized in the fieldwork was the interview. Once I had a set of defined questions that I found relevant to my research I proceeded to ask the people that I found were most knowledgeable about the topics I wanted to address and that I had developed a sufficiently strong rapport with. In her article "Intervjuer i samfunnsvitenskapene" (1999), Randi Kaarhus distinguishes between what she calls structured and unstructured interviews. As she writes, the structured interview will have both predefined questions and a predefined set of alternatives to choose from as answers. This type of interview will thus comply better with the scientific criteria of replicability (Kaarhus, 1999). However, it can be rather limiting in the sense that it will force the answers to fit a set frame of answers. The unstructured interview on the other hand, will often have a predefined set of questions made by the interviewer, but in contrast to the structured type will allow some, or all the questions to have open answers (Kaarhus, 1999).

In the interviews I did, I chose to make room for open answers and even encouraged the person I was interviewing to elaborate on certain topics that I noticed they were eager to discuss as well as asking individual follow-up questions to some of their answers. Despite of the decreased replicability that goes with doing such unstructured interviews, I found that it led to discovering new questions as well as finding interesting answers to questions I had not even previously thought of but that nonetheless proved to be very relevant to my research. By using such an explorative and dynamic approach, the interview becomes less asymmetric (Kaarhus, 1999), and is also in a way contributing to involving the person being interviewed in the process of highlighting what is relevant for the research project. The latter point works to counteract the problematic asymmetric power dynamic that anthropologists have been criticized for in recent decades especially by post-modern thinkers, which we will return to later on.

### **3.6 Further thoughts on interviewing**

Conducting formal interviews provided me with a different set of answers to a set of similar questions. This proved itself very useful for my analysis, as I could compare the variety of answers to the same questions and then look for patterns and irregularities. It cleared up a lot of ambiguities in my field notes and helped to both confirm and discard some of my assumptions that I had formed from the participant observation. I noticed how during the participant observation process I was forming some general ideas, that I used to make sense of the data I kept encountering. However, these assumptions were not always correct, and by asking about these assumptions in the formal interviews I sometimes found to my surprise that I had been too quick to jump to conclusions.

Perceiving the interviews as some kind of tool to find completely “truthful” data however is not unproblematic. I did notice sometimes that when people were formally interviewed they were more self-conscious and more careful with their answers. This I presume is a very common response when people are being asked questions in the somewhat formal way that a one to one interview entails. I thus felt that this increased self-consciousness had to be taken into account when analyzing the answers from the interviews.

### **3.7 Film**

The third method I will discuss is how I have utilized the film camera. Using the camera as a tool for conducting research certainly proved itself beneficial, however there were also some drawbacks worth mentioning.

A challenge of working with a camera when doing participant observation, is that it makes the anthropologists presence more pronounced. In Colin Youngs article “Principles of Visual Anthropology” 1995, he discusses the ideal of ethnographic filmmaking of trying to record and photograph so called “normal” behavior. However, as he writes, “Clearly what finally has to be understood by this ideal is that normal behavior being filmed is the behavior that is normal for the subjects under the circumstances, including, but not exclusively, the fact that they are being filmed.” (Young, 1995). When people are aware they are being filmed, it can often cause them to perform in a special way fueled by the spotlight of the camera (Henley, 2004, p.118). They may grow eager to show more of themselves, show a different version of themselves, or tone down their whole performance and grow shy and withdrawn. This is linked to how people always are in a process of impression management in social situations,

navigating between the “back region” and the “front” region (Goffman, 1971, pp.114-115). However, with the camera involved the need for impression management can be further increased.

In the case of my fieldwork, I found that the people I pointed the camera at tended towards becoming slightly more reserved and withdrawn, especially in the beginning. This made me hesitate to bring along the camera at times, as I felt that the presence of the camera was in a way compromising the ‘naturalness’ of the situation, and increased the distance between me and the people I was with. To mitigate this common effect of the camera, I started bringing the camera along with me more frequently only to film nature and location shots etc. I also lent one of the sons in the family the camera to film a school project, as well as showing the family rushes from what I was filming during the fieldwork. It appeared to me that the more I was making everyone familiar with the camera they became more at ease with being filmed.

Another challenge I faced with the camera was to do participant observation in the moment, at the same time as focusing on the technical aspects of filming. Many times, I found that I was so busy managing the framing and focus that I was taken out of the situation that was playing out right in front of me. Although this compromised my full ability to observe and participate in what was going on, it also payed of immensely upon reviewing the footage later. When a situation is frozen in time, in the way it is with a camera recording, it is made into a document that can be interpreted and reinterpreted (Macdougall, 2019, p.16). As the accent of the people I was filming sometimes made it difficult for me to fully comprehend their Spanish in the moment, it was very rewarding to review the footage later as I went through the clips in the evening, as well as sitting long hours in the editing room working extensively with the rushes. Not only did it help me with the language challenge, but the opportunity to review the situations and interactions I had filmed after returning from fieldwork, also gave me a second chance to interpret them in a wider context. As I now had a much more comprehensive knowledge about what they were talking about in these situations than I had when I was experiencing them for the first time, I could decipher a lot more information from these situations.

### **3.8 Film Equipment**

Regarding equipment, I was entrusted with a Sony PXW-X70 XD Camcorder with a lot of different equipment for making a professional film. Before I left from Norway I also bought a monopod, as I decided to leave the tripod at home since I did not want to be weighed down by

too much equipment to carry since I was on my own. The decision to bring a monopod proved itself to be quite useful as I found it allowed me to be much more flexible than the heavy tripod would. I could follow people around on trips, rituals and other social gatherings and quickly adjust the monopod to a different angle when the situation so required, and still retain much of the stability that a tripod can provide. The only drawback was that it was more challenging to do the smooth panoramic movements that a tripod can allow for, when I wanted to film panoramic shots of the mountains surrounding me.

When it comes to microphone equipment I decided against using the boom pole we were equipped with as this was difficult to manage while filming by myself. Of course, I could have tried to teach one of the people I was following in using a boom pole, however I decided against it. One of the reasons was that the boom pole makes the presence of the camera a lot more pronounced and can be very distracting for people who are not used to being filmed. I therefor mostly relied on mounting the directional and omnidirectional microphones directly on the camera. I also frequently used the lavalier, especially when following just one person. I found that it worked quite well, especially when I used both a microphone on the camera as well as the lavalier. This gave me the possibility to find a better balance when mixing the sound of the person talking and the surrounding sound ambiance. However, when only using one microphone mounted on the camera, I was sometimes too far away from the person speaking and therefor ended up with too much background noise. Using the boom-pole to get closer to the person I was recording could of course have mitigated this problem, which is noticeable in certain parts of the film.

As I was filming in a manner inspired by the norms in observational cinema, where one simply lets the camera roll and wait for life to happen so to speak, I ended up with an enormous amount of material. This made for a frustratingly long process of going through the rushes in search of interesting elements when I was making my shot list both on the evenings after filming, but also upon returning to Norway. However frustrating this process was, it allowed me to discover a lot of interesting details that I had not noticed while filming, which ended up leading to great findings both for the film and thesis.

### **3.9 The problem of representation**

In the 1960's there emerged a post-modern critique questioning the discipline of anthropology's validity regarding neutrality, objectivity, truth and its relationship to Western imperialism and academic colonialism (Sluka and Robben, 2007). This critique posed several

questions regarding the anthropologists' ability and right to represent the people they were studying. With an emerging awareness of the way power relations was affecting the production of knowledge, anthropologists had to reassess some of their fundamental methods which led to an increased concern with reciprocity, reflexivity and collaboration (Sluka and Robben, 2007). The problem of representation was indeed echoed during my fieldwork as Inti, one of the sons of the family, asked me "You can come here and stay with us for four months, but do you think that if I went to Norway and spent four months with your family that I would be able to comprehend the depths of your culture?"<sup>3</sup>. This is of course a very justified question that is challenging to answer in a way that fully legitimizes the anthropological fieldwork method.

Of course, as Inti is expressing with his question, it is naïve to think that the anthropologist can do perfect cultural translation with his limited time and unescapable cultural bias. However, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes has suggested, attempting to do "good enough" ethnography, built on careful observation with empathy and compassion might work as a good compromise (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). Further on, one has to take into account that anthropology has the ability to connect and sensitize its readers to the struggles of people, which can spark public discussions and influence opinion sometimes leading to genuine social change (Sluka and Robben, 2007). Thus, I would argue that "good enough" ethnography, if done in a careful way with compassion and empathy can be a legitimate endeavor worthy of undertaking despite its obvious challenges regarding representing other people whether at home or abroad.

### **3.10 Collaboration**

Regarding anthropological filmmaking, balancing the authority of the filmmaker and the wishes of the people being filmed can often be a challenge. An obvious challenge regarding this for the filmmaker is to know what to film, and later choose what part of his material he can use or exclude. There are of course understandable reasons why the people being filmed might object to certain things being included, such as material that could be damaging or embarrassing for them. As David Macdougall writes in his book "The looking machine"

<sup>3</sup> With respect to the challenge of representing the people and the data they provided me with in the fieldwork process, I have many places in this thesis chosen to make use of extended direct quotations, instead of only writing down my own interpretation of these quotes.



(2019), trust between filmmaker and those he is filming is crucial and is something that must be developed over the course of the filmmaking process. However, as the process of filming can be complicated, establishing the rules and protocols can be good to do in advance of the filming (MacDougall, 2019, p.21). One of the decisions I made before filming with the family in my own project was to let them know that they would be shown the film before I would finish it. In this way, they would have the chance to let me know if I had used something that they would feel uncomfortable with having in the film. I believe this helped put the family more at ease when I was pointing the camera at them, as well as giving me more freedom to initiate filming and helped decrease my constant second guessing of when to film and not. However, this arrangement did come with some challenges as well.

After showing the film to the family a few weeks before submitting I got a longer list than I was expecting with changes that they wanted. Four of the six family members wanted one clip of themselves cut out of the film. Even though I felt reluctant to take out these clips which I very much liked, it was a part of the deal we had made prior to filming and it would be wrong not to respect it. However, one of the clips, (the one where Sara is answering her phone in the reception), I could not take out as it was the only place where I could introduce the title with the name of Luis in the beginning. I therefore had to exercise my authority as a filmmaker, and ask for a compromise. I therefore asked if I could take out all the other clips they asked for, but retain this clip which I dearly needed as I did not perceive it to be damaging or very embarrassing to her.

“In documentaries, several events are often compressed into one and people are portrayed as holding simpler views than they do in reality. The ambiguities are simply smoothed away”, (Macdougall, 2019, p.18). One of the comments I got from the family after showing the film before finishing it, was a question if I maybe could make the stories I was telling more coherent so they could be understood more thoroughly in their context. This is something I found difficult when creating the film, especially since it is only so much one can fit in to a 30-minute film. Reading the accompanying thesis will hopefully work to fill some of these gaps in context, however the people who will read the text is unfortunately likely to be a select few compared to everyone who will only see the film.

## **Chapter 4: Empirical part 1**

In this first of the two empirical chapters, I will be telling about my own discovery process of the ancestral medicine that came as I was staying with the family that runs Inti Wasi. I describe their journey of entering into what they call ‘the world of the ancestral medicine’ and look at how it has affected their lives and the community around them.

### **4.1 Entering the field**

The first weeks of my fieldwork at Inti Wasi were rich and chaotic. At this point I was simply taking in all the of the new impressions, words, gestures, smells and foods like the roasted guinea pig that it turned out is no more of a pet than is a regular pig in Saraguro. Àngelita, the mother in the family running Inti Wasi, gave me a warm welcome and brought me early on to visit some of the interesting and scenic places in Saraguro. Àngelita is a warm person, very proud of her ethnic roots and stubbornly insisting on their own traditions and values, resisting the acculturation process that is taking place all around her. She has a wide understanding of different herbs used for medicine and food, and are cultivating many of them on their property, some of which she is using to treat visitors in the sauna service they offer at their touristic center. She is also an authority on their native ‘Kichwa’ language as she grew up speaking it before she was forced in school to stop using it and learn Spanish.

Before getting the time to properly orientate myself and get my bearings on this new existence, I was invited to participate in several rituals as my arrival was coincidentally just in time for one of the big celebrations of the year. The celebration I was to experience was that of the ‘Chakana’ or the Andean cross, which has been an important symbol for several ancient civilizations like the Tihuanacu and the Inca (Timmer, 2003). I was happy to be invited to participate in the celebrations as participating in these long rituals filled with lots of details and spoken information gave me a nice introduction to ‘the Andean cosmology’ that seemed to be very central to their spirituality. The Andean cosmology, is millennia-old with roots in the Andean region reaching back as far as at least the Chavín de Huantar civilization 1500 – 300 BCE (Timmer, 2003) as well as being central in the Inca civilization (Lopez, 2011).

The rituals I was invited to participate in took place in “the spiritual center” at Inti Wasi which they referred to as the ‘Ushnu’ which is the Kichwa word for church/spiritual center. This was a circular space with a roof but no walls, that the family I lived with had built on their property. It was filled with lots of pictures of Inca leaders of the past, Ecuadorian

indigenous rights protagonists, flowers, colorful symbols, a tiny bit of Catholic symbolism, stones, shells and in the center on the floor, painted with red, green, blue and yellow was the Chakana – the Andean cross.



**Figure 2:** The Ushnu. (Døvigen, 2019)

Here in the ‘Ushnu’ came some 30 people mainly from the community of Ilincho, to celebrate the Chakana and their spiritual community of people following the Andean Cosmology. As the spiritual center was on the property of the family I was living with, and both Ángelita and her husband Luis played important parts in facilitating the rituals, it became apparent that they had a central role within what seemed like a spiritual movement. However, it also became clear to me that the process of doing these rituals were not all too familiar to the people present. The ones facilitating, sometimes made small errors, which would be corrected by Ángelitas brother, Polivio, which seemed to be an authority on the matter. As I gradually started to understand, these rituals, and the practice of the Andean cosmology, was in a way reasonably new to many of the people present. This slight uncertainty of the know how’s of their own rituals came as a surprise to me. As these were practices, reaching back to the pre-Columbian period, I expected them to go more seamless. As it turned out however, I had failed to take into consideration the magnitude of the systemic oppression of all things considered “pagan” that had come with the Spanish conquest.

Through participating in different celebrations and rituals in the first month, it seemed more and more clear to me that what was taking place in this community was in fact a sort of digging up of old traditions, a cultural and spiritual revival. This observation led me to ask questions such as what could be the source of this revival, for how long had this been going on and who were the key persons in organizing and developing this movement. As I got more comfortable conversing with my new family, Ángelita opened up to me about their past and revealed to me their own role in all of this. As expressed in the film, Ángelita's mother told me she had heard nothing about the Andean cosmology and such things in her own Catholic upbringing and this was something that had emerged in the past 15 years. In their case, as Ángelita told me, the starting point for this spiritual revival had come after her and her brother's family had started to work with a yachak in the beginning of the 2000s that had introduced them to the ancestral medicine. After hearing much talk of this ancestral medicine, and being told that the medicine was a central source of their strength I became interested in investigating this matter further.

#### **4.2 The family's introduction to 'the world of the medicine'**

To tell the story of how the family I stayed with got into the process of working with the ancestral medicine I will need to begin by introducing the father in the household, Luis.

Luis Lozano Chalán is a cheerful and enthusiastic man in his 50s and was exceptionally helpful and generous with showing me their world and introducing me to the field of the ancestral medicine during my stay. He works at a high school in the parish called 'San Pablo de Tenta' in Saraguro, where he teaches biology, philosophy and the Andean Cosmology. However, he is also in charge of doing the rituals in their spiritual center for their visitors at Inti Wasi, as well as doing energetic 'limpias' which are a form of energetic purification with different medicinal (non-psychoactive) plants. Luis is very enthusiastic about discovering and sharing knowledge about Andean history, philosophy and medicine and has worked alongside archeologists researching Inca ruins. At the time of my stay he was working on a book describing his experiences with the ancestral medicine he is so passionate about.

As Luis told me, their journey of entering the world of the ancestral medicine, began in the year 2002 when they began to visit the yachak 'Lucho' to participate in healing ceremonies in the Amazon. Luis and his wife were initially motivated to begin working with the ancestral medicine after suffering health problems that they could not find relief from by the conventional doctors in Saraguro. As the yachak lived in the Amazon at the time, they would

make long commutes during the weekends to visit him, always bringing their children along with them. Here they would participate in healing ceremonies during the night where they would receive different types of plant medicines, whereof the San Pedro cactus was one of the fundamental ones. Ángelita explained me how the yachak also would take them to healing ceremonies in waterfalls, take them on long walks in the mountains at night, aid them in talking through family problems and teach them about medicinal plants and the ancient Andean cosmology.

Luis told me that he also in the beginning had his doubts about the ancestral medicine as he had no prior experience or knowledge of it. As he said, his own parents would also use lots of different plants for medicinal purposes before the arrival of the pharmacological medicine in Saraguro, however they did not work with any psychotropic plants like the San Pedro cactus, the Peyote cactus , ‘la Trensilla’ and ‘Ayahuasca’ which Luis refers to as the ‘power plants’ or the ‘sacred plant medicines’.

However, through experiencing the positive effects that the ancestral medicine had on the lives of himself and his family, he was convinced little by little of its efficacy. One of the obvious effects they experienced were betterment of their physical health. Among other things he got rid of his previous lung problems, and his wife Ángelita saw a huge betterment in her problems with gastritis which she was on the verge of going through surgery to heal before starting the process with the ancestral medicine. Along with the obvious health improvements they witnessed, he also told me that it had a great spiritual and psychological impact on them as well as bringing the family as a unit much closer together which were all integral parts of the healing of their physical symptoms of disease.

Although these trips to visit the yachak had a very positive impact on their lives they would mostly not announce it to others as it was not viewed in a very positive light by the people around them at the time. As this process happened before the constitution change in 2008 people became very skeptical when the family eventually told about how they were going to these ceremonies with the yachak in the Amazon. The reason for this was that this still was something very much associated with witchery and people around were even worried that they would cause harm or try to influence other people to also join in on the same path as them. Because of the misconception people had that these practices had something to do with witchery, even members of their own extended families would criticize them and accuse them of following a bad path.

What gave them the most resistance however was the Catholic religion which has a very strong stance in Saraguro. During their process of working with the ancestral medicine in the Amazon they little by little stopped going to church as they had used to, as they became increasingly intrigued by the Andean spirituality. People from the Catholic religion would say that the people that are in this process of recuperating the ancestral medicine, are involved in witchery and are leaving the religion and do not want to know anything about God. However, as Luis says in the film “Somehow this made us think, but in any case, as we kept deepening our knowledge we took notice that we are with God, it’s just that we don’t call him God as such, our divine being is Pacha Kamak and he is also God”.<sup>4</sup>

The social pressure they encountered on their new path did not discourage them however, and they eventually started to initiate a revitalization of rituals and celebrations associated with the Andean Cosmology back in their own community of Ilincho as well as their neighboring community ‘Las Lagunas’. As Luis says referring to this conflict they had had with the catholic religion, “However, this had repercussions for the Andean cultural and spiritual recuperation of the celebration of the Raymis.<sup>5</sup> Because we started as the first in reinforcing, sure there were already a small number of people that were doing these celebrations, but then we were the first in assisting these meetings, proposing to do the rituals and bringing the yachak so he could do the ritual and ceremony for us etc.”

As I was being told these stories I was thinking to myself, how come this family could endure so much resistance and mockery and challenge the Catholic ideas that they had been surrounded by since birth? When I asked Luis about this, he told me that on the one hand they quite simply felt a lot better after following the ideas from this alternative paradigm. Another reason was that they came in contact with a spirituality that they could very much experience for themselves. Through working with the sacred plant medicines, instead of just reading about it in a book or getting told about it by a priest, as was the case for their former faith, they could have their own spiritual experiences. This idea is supported by what their yachak ‘Lucho’ told me as I later interviewed him and asked him about the significance of the use of

<sup>4</sup> The direct quotes implemented in this part of the text is translated from Spanish by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Los Raymis are a group of festivals and celebrations dating back to the pre-Columbian era that are tied together with the Andean calendar. The most prominent of these celebrations are the ‘Inti Raymi’, a celebration of the sun, which today is celebrated all throughout the Andes by indigenous people.

the San Pedro cactus and the other ‘power plants’ for the spirituality of the Andean towns. As Lucho told me, “...Aguacola helps you to search, to center on the endemic spirituality of the [Andean] towns. It is an energy... This spirituality is more practical in relation to other religions. The other religions remain instead in words only. Whereas our spirituality is [about] living it practically, and one lives it every day.”

### **4.3 Going to collect medicinal plants**

After showing my interest in their knowledge of the healing plants, Ángelita started to invite me along when she and her husband went to collect them in the mountains. The herbs we were looking for were sometimes located in rather remote areas in the mountains, which we would access in their pick-up truck. The search would then always begin with Luis doing what they called ‘soplos’. This referred to the process of filling the mouth with a type of flower water or herb concoction and then spraying it out again with force. One in each northern, southern, eastern and western direction. He would then ask permission to ‘Pacha Mama’, a central deity in the Andean Cosmology, sometimes translated as the earth mother, and then he would ask permission from the specific mountain we would be collecting on. Even if they spotted valuable plants before this, they would always wait until they had asked permission before collecting.

Subsequently we would all give sweet fruits that we had brought with us to the mountain spirits. This process was a necessary step to show respect and to increase the chances that the plants we were looking for would show themselves to us. It was also related to a very important aspect from the Andean cosmology called ‘ainy’. ‘Ainy’ is a concept that highlights the importance of reciprocity, which they told me is also one of the most important keys to maintaining good health. If we would simply come to the mountain and take the herbs, there would not be reciprocity, and the mountain would maybe not give us access. I was later told by a practitioner of the ancestral medicine that this type of disharmony where one just takes from nature and does not give back, is regarded as something that can produce disease in humans.

Subsequently after asking permission and giving something to the mountain, they would begin collecting. They would collect all kinds of different flowers and herbs and it was an impressive biodiversity in these lush green mountains considering the altitude of around 3000 meters above sea level. Some plants they would use for making teas, some for applying topically on the skin, some for guarding in bottles and mix with alcohol to make medicine.

The main plant they were interested in in the first trips I came along for, was called 'la trencilla'. 'La trencilla' they told me is one of the greatest medicinal plants in the Andes for cleaning the organism of bacteria, difficult emotions, bad thoughts or energies. Their hope was to bring this plant to their yachak Lucho to do a ceremony with this plant for the whole family. As I did some research on this plant I found that it is surprisingly little information about it considering how several people I encountered praised it as a plant with great healing value.

#### **4.4 The Ceremony**

I will now give further insight into what the plant medicine ceremonies so far mentioned entails by writing about my own experience when I was invited to come along with the family to visit the yachak Lucho.

Not long after the search for 'la trencilla', I was invited to come along with the family to participate in one of the healing ceremonies they would monthly attend with the yachak Lucho. I was thrilled to be invited, although a bit nervous, but I could not turn down such an opportunity. So, one evening in the following week I found myself tucked in next to the sons in the back of the family's pick-up truck, speeding through the misty mountains on my way to my first ceremony. With us we were bringing the cactus medicine that I had helped brew with Inti, one of the sons in the house, and a bag full of herbs and flowers we had picked to give to the yachak. It was a starry night with a bright full moon and I was excited to spend the night under the open sky.

When we arrived at the house of the yachak however, I learned that the ceremony was not to be conducted outside under the open sky as I had expected, but inside the house. As we entered the rectangular room where the ceremony was to be held my eyes were quickly captured by a type of altar which they referred to as 'la mesa' at the one end of the room. The altar contained a number of different bottles with different plant medicines, artifacts and symbols like the Chakana (the Andean cross), a painting of an Inca warrior, different stones, shells, a rope and behind the 'mesa' stacked against the wall, four wooden poles and a sword. An old couple was there as well as a younger couple with a toddler sleeping on the floor. The yachak, Lucho, appeared to me as warm and cheerful man with a welcoming smile and radiant eyes. He did not at all have the heavy and authoritarian presence that spiritual leaders can sometimes have, and his humor and lightness put me at ease.



After everyone had found their places to sit on the benches surrounding the room, meaning the whole family including their grandmother, Ángelita's sister and her son and the two couples, we all received candles. We were all to lead the candles over our bodies to cleanse our body from bad energies, and then light it and put it next to the altar. Thereafter, the yachak would give a longer speech giving thanks to the spirits for the medicine, put in an intention and ask for a good ceremony. After some time, Lucho poured some of the cactus concoction we had brought in a cup and mixed in liquids from some of the other bottles on his altar. I asked Ángelita what it was he was adding, and all she could tell me was that it was his secret recipe. After addressing every person in the room the yachak began by drinking the first cup of the medicine. The same process would be followed by everyone in the room. After we had all ingested the bittersweet liquid, Lucho engaged the group in conversation and it emerged a light and fun atmosphere with lots of humor. After two more cups, the effects were undeniable and the atmosphere in the room became more serious. The medicine we had all ingested made me feel energetic and dizzy at the same time, and when I closed my eyes I could sometimes see strange lights as well as having interesting introspective thoughts.

After the initial effects of dizziness, some people went out to vomit, and subsequently it developed an interesting conversation in the room. The family was having what seemed to be a kind of therapy session with the yachak. They would open up to each other emotionally, and talk about difficult things that needed to be addressed. It appeared like the yachak functioned as what seemed like a sort of family therapist with lots of humor to break up the heavy atmosphere that sometimes developed.

In ceremonies I later attended, I observed a similar process where couples would come together and talk about their problems under the influence of the medicine and with the support of a yachak. My presumption that the experience was to be limited to an individual introspective experience was being contested by seeing how the ceremony was indeed also a chance for people to get together and talk about difficult issues that would perhaps be more difficult in a normal day to day consciousness.

After the last cup of the cactus medicine had been ingested the time came for ingesting another plant medicine, namely tobacco. In one of the yachak's bottles he had prepared a medicine derived mainly from the tobacco plant which he poured into small shells from the coast that we all received. The following action was far from pleasant and seemed completely absurd to me, but was apparently an integral part of the ceremony. The liquid from the shell,

was to be administered through the right nostril, which meant we had to tilt our heads backwards and pour it down through the nose. The liquid burned intensely in the nose canal, and as everyone present was making strange swallowing noises and gagging to get the liquid down I felt like I was in another world. After finally completing my shell, I was only to receive a new one for the left nostril, this time almost more intense, whereof one of the participants ended up running out of the room to vomit. The tobacco made me feel dizzy and uncomfortable and I was starting to feel ready for the sun to come up.

As the first signs of the morning started to appear we were all one after another asked to undress (leaving only our underwear) and then go out to Lucho to receive a cleansing of our body, mind and spirit. As I observed this process I saw how each person were outside with the yachak talking for a long time about their issues and receiving guidance. They would then receive the ‘soplo’ the spraying by the yachak of a plant medicine into their faces and then all over their bodies before being whipped lightly with some plants and sometimes the rope that the yachak had at his alter.

At last around 07.am we left the residence after all paying 20\$ to Lucho, thanking him and each other before leaving. As I was sitting in the back of the pick-up truck after a night quite out of the ordinary I was peering out over the green covered mountains in the light of a magnificent sunrise. It was not just the unacquainted gringo that was awestruck by the unprecedented beauty of this place as one of the sons told me ‘this my friend, is the Andean mountain range’. I did not yet know exactly what to make of the whole experience, but I was filled with gratitude for having had the opportunity to participate in such an event.

#### **4.5 Fundacion Salud y Nuevo vida**

After the initial ceremony, I went on to witness several more at a center in Ilincho called ‘Fundacion Salud y Nueva vida’. This center was run by the yachak Polivio Japon which held plant medicine ceremonies all year around, every 14 days. These ceremonies which contained a larger group of people, between 20 and 35 people during my visits, had both indigenous and mezstioes from outside the community participating.

These ceremonies bore similarities to the first I had attended with Lucho, however they also had many differences. The main plant medicine administered was the San Pedro cactus, although some participants were also given Ayahuasca. The ceremonies would typically start with the yachak and his helpers giving long talks, lasting hours before the medicine was

administered. During these talks the speakers would typically express a lot of appreciation for the plants, the spirits, the elements and ancestors, as well as asking them for a good healing ceremony. The last one to give a speech was always the yachak himself, who would discuss and advice on different topics regarding how to deal with difficulties and challenges and how to live more harmonious lives as individuals, families and as a larger community. His speeches were always influenced by the traditional Andean values.

#### **4.6 Inti Raymi**

As June was coming to an end the yearly celebration of ‘Inti Raymi’ was approaching. This festival is perhaps the most important ancestral celebrations in the Andean community’s and begins the 21th of June. It is a festival celebrated all over the Andes to express gratitude for the sun, called Inti in Kicwcha, which is one of the sacred elements and dieties in the Andean Cosmology that creates the foundation for all life on the planet. In Saraguro the festival was celebrated over three days with different rituals, concerts and public talks. In Inti Wasi where I stayed, Luis the father in the family held two rituals with people from both within and outside of Saraguro. He told me that their family and a small group of others had been in the forefront of revitalizing and strengthening these rituals by bringing along their yachak to perform the rituals in the beginning of the 2000s.

#### **4.7 The Sun Dance**

Shortly after the Inti Raymi festival I was invited along to participate in a sun dance ceremony with the next to youngest son in the family, Inti. This ceremony was to be held in the mountains between Saraguro and Cuenca. As I heard the family talk about the ceremony which entailed a full day of dancing barefoot with almost no food and water under the hot sun I started to have my doubts about it. As I asked the daughter Sara why people want to put themselves through such a seemingly uncomfortable experience, she answered me that it is a unique opportunity to feel the vibration of Mother Earth.

The day before the ceremony I was instructed to make 54 cloth pockets and fill them each with tobacco and put in an intention for my own life, friends, family or the Earth in each one of the cloth pockets. I was then to attach all the pockets on a red garn thread that I had to bring along for the ceremony.

The evening before the ceremony we were driven together with friends of Inti to a remote place in the mountains between Saraguro and Cuenca where we were left of to keep walking

through the mountains to reach our final destination. After a night of walking, we reached the destination where the ceremony was to be held. Here, in the midst of surrounding huge mountains, we met up with about 90 people, many of which had come the night before and slept in tents. The people we met were mostly indigenous from Ecuador, but also mestizos and indigenous from countries like Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia, and even a few Europeans. As we arrived we were instructed to attach the yarn threads we each had brought on to a wooden fence around a big circle with a tree in the middle where the ceremony was to be conducted.

The way the ceremony was to be conducted was by dancing around the wooden tree while an orchestra of indigenous from the Saraguro and Canari regions would play traditional Andean music. This was to go on from early in the morning until the evening with only three breaks and almost no food albeit a serving of fruit and the corn wine 'Chicha' and San Pedro medicine. Before we could begin however, we were led into a scorching hot sweatlodge to do a *temazcal* ritual. The *temazcal* is an ancient healing practice with its origins in Mexico which is used as a healing ritual in parts of the Andes. After the intense *temazcal* ritual, the musicians began playing their instruments and the ceremony commenced.

Even though the whole ordeal was tiring for mind and body, it was a truly a unique experience to dance around the tree, accompanied by joyous Andean tunes, feeling the earth under bare feet, with the breathtaking scenery that surrounded us. After each period of dancing was completed, the group would gather around the tree, put their hands fourth and bow to the tree symbolizing Mother Earth.

Many of the people present were seasoned practitioners on the path of the medicine, but the two most experienced were the two yachaks present, one of them being the yachak Polivio from Fundacion Salud y Nueva Vida in Saraguro where I had previously been present during healing ceremonies. These two yachaks were the principal leaders of the ceremony and before commencing the last period of dancing, we all gathered in the circle to listen to them each holding a speech. In their talks, after giving thanks to all that had participated, and the sacred elements, spirits and the medicine, they emphasized the value and importance of the community that encompassed this ceremony. They both spoke at lengths about the importance of Mother Earth and addressed the topics of global warming and climate change that is threatening her that we all must address individually. Before finishing Polivio thoroughly

explained about the Andean precepts of not being lazy, not stealing and not lying which he also had done in all the foregoing ceremonies I had attended with him.

After the ceremony was over, it was a new round in the temazcal, before we all thanked each other for the experience and went to have an anticipated feast. Through talking more with the participants from the ceremony I started to see the contours of what seemed like a counter-culture. A counterculture of people rebelling against the neo-liberal capitalist consumer society, coming together for an opportunity to collectively heal, build community and thank and connect with Mother Earth and the sacred elements.

## **Chapter 5: Empirical part 2**

After being introduced to the ancestral medicine ceremonies first hand and seeing the importance it had had on the family I stayed with and the people I met, I got increasingly interested in investigating how these experiences specifically was affecting these people. An impression I was increasingly getting was that the practice of the medicine was fueling a kind of revival of the Pre-Columbian Andean perspectives and customs I had been witnessing. I will now present some of the opinions of the people I interviewed regarding the role the ancestral medicine had played in their lives and on their culture at large.

### **5.1 Psychoanalytic perspective and ‘Sumak Kawsay’**

#### *Interview 1 - Ferndando*

During one of the ceremonies I witnessed at Fundacion Salud y nueva vida, I found myself sitting next to a 32 year old psychologist called Fernando who was assisting the yachak in conducting the ceremony. Fernando (32) was a meztiso from Chile but had been working with the San Pedro cactus since age 15 and had travelled extensively around South and Central America to learn from different practitioners of various ways of practicing ancestral medicine. For the last 10 years, he had been coming to Saraguro to learn and he seemed to have an extensive knowledge on the topic of ancestral medicine. As I told Fernando about the topic of my thesis, he told me he would be very happy to give me an interview the next day before he was returning to his country in the evening.

As Fernando was both a trained psychologist which is his profession in Chile, as well as being thoroughly acquainted with the Andean worldview and philosophy, I was eager to know his perspective on the potential for healing mental health problems when working with the San

Pedro cactus. What he told me was that it especially has a lot of potential in regards to helping a patient to uncover content from the subconscious mind. However, it depends a lot on how you work with it. In a psychotherapeutic perspective, simply having a patient ingesting such a plant is not sufficient in itself. What is needed is a process of preparation before the experience and then a process of integration after where the patient can discuss and analyze the content of what he has experienced or seen during the session and then work with this.

However, he also told me that a key potential of working with such a plant is that it has the ability to transform one's relationship to nature. "From my point of view, the death of nature, the process of making nature into an object, has enclosed the human being in a spiritual and psychic solitude. The recognition however, that nature is alive, that nature is another being, I think is a source of health. The indigenous culture says that the lack of respect produces disease... If we recuperate the memory that everything is alive, and that nature is a character and that we can relate and contact her as if she was another "you", it is said that this can help us to re-establish good health."

Fernando told me he had worked with numerous other power plants, like Ayahuasca and the Peyote cactus. As I ask him why he prefers to work with the San Pedro cactus he tells me that this plant specifically works with your capacity to love and accept yourself. It has a lot of capacity to help you reaffirm yourself and to repair your self-esteem. It can widen your perspective of yourself but also that of humanity.

As he told me, he was very delighted to see how many people were attending the ceremonies in recent time, as opposed to 10 years ago when he first came to Saraguro when there were almost no one. The spread of the ancestral medicine was however not something limited to Saraguro he told me, but rather a phenomenon stretching all throughout the American continent. This had started around 1992, 500 years after the first arrival of the European colonizers, as curanderos started to accept outsiders and meztisoos, which previously had been kept away from participating in the ceremonies. The reason for this change of attitude towards the meztisos was that the curanderos started to understand that to keep this tradition alive they had to open up to outsiders that were interested, as many of their own young were disappearing from these traditions. As he told me, this has happened not only in Latin America but also in the United States with the Sioux, Lakota, Navaho and so on. And as he said, now it is even white people that are doing the traditional sun dance ritual, the vision quests and so on.

Something I found very interesting is that he told me that there exists an inter-ethnic and international network also encompassing meztisoos, called 'el camino rojo' which are collectively working towards a resurgence of the ancestral medicine and traditions. This network he says, are connected all the way from Canada to 'Tierra del Fuego', the southern tip of Chile and Argentina. In South America he said, there is a uniting philosophy, value system or ideal for the people on this path, called Sumak Kausay. The name 'Sumak Kausay' comes from the Kichwa language and can be loosely translates to good living or well living. It can be seen as a philosophy that governs life, which involves maintaining an ideology that recognize, value and practice the philosophy of the ways of "traditional" indigenous life and has strong ties to the Andean Cosmology (Duran Lopez, 2011). It is built on core values of reciprocity, equality, sustainability and a deep respect and appreciation for nature and 'Pacha Mama' which typically is translated to Mother Earth (Duran Lopez, 2011). The three fundamental precepts of Sumak Kawsay is; do not be lazy, do not steal and do not lie.

Upon hearing about this, it occurred to me that the plant medicine ceremonies also seemed to serve as arenas where the values of Sumak Kaysay and the Andean Cosmology could be articulated, promoted and interiorized.

## **5.2 Increased validation and curiosity for ethnic roots**

When conducting interviews about the use of the ancestral medicine I was eager to hear the perspectives of both the younger and older generations on the matter. I thus decided to discuss the matter with the youngest son in the family, Amawta. Amawta is a calm and curious 18-year-old who graduated high school as the best of his class during my stay. Although an industrious student he is a young man of many talents. In addition to playing Andean flutes in a group called 'Walpay' he is also an avid dancer and aspiring film maker. All of these activities are done with a strong emphasis on expressing his indigenous culture. As he was born after the family had started their process of working with the ancestral medicine he differed from his other siblings in that he had not experienced going regularly to Catholic church in his childhood.

### *Interview 2.1 - Amawta*

Amawta started out by telling me that it is currently many new social developments going on in Saraguro. A few years ago, almost everyone in Saraguro were Catholics. These days however it is less unified as many people of the younger generations are leaving the Catholic

religion and are becoming atheists. There is also a growing number that has left the Catholic religion for the Andean Cosmology as well as people that are following a mix between the two belief systems. However, as he said, there is also a tendency of acculturation going on with many young people that in a way are leaving their culture and are cutting the long emblematic braided hair of the Saraguro. When I asked him about the reason these people are cutting their hair he answered: “They don’t know because... Let’s say we have a person, and a foreigner asks them why do you have this long hair? And then, since this person does not know, it’s like ‘I don’t know this’, so I will cut my hair like the others.”

When I asked him how the ancestral medicine has affected his life he told me “I think that since the beginning, all this work with the medicine is like, when you are with the medicine you are asking yourself questions. Asking many things, asking yourself questions. And further, when you are with the medicine, you are concentrated, searching for information, remembering things...It has awoken the curiosity in me and made me begin to ask, why this, why that. And this way I think I have gathered a lot of information. Information that has been useful for me to keep maintaining myself in my roots.” Pointing to the young people that are cutting their hair and distancing themselves from the culture he says “I have talked to these people and they do not know, they haven’t asked themselves, why it is like that. It is like they don’t know a lot of things, and I think that the [ancestral] medicine has helped me to get to know and to be able to value what I am and what I have.”

When I asked him why he keeps his long hair he responded, “Well, speaking about ancestral medicine, for example, the hair represents you, foremost as indigenous it represents your strength, your courage and more than anything it is a root.” He went on to say, “People have asked me as well, why do you have this long hair, and I have responded, that it is a way for me to connect, to be able to connect with nature. When other people have asked, I have responded that this is my root, this is what I identify with. Identification as indigenous.”

### *Interview 3.1 – Luis*

When I approached his father Luis and later his uncle Polivio (not to be confused with the yachak with the same name mentioned earlier) with the same question of how the ancestral medicine has affected their life, they both similarly to Amawta answered that it has helped them to rediscover and revalue their roots and origins.



Specifically, when I asked Luis this question, he told me how the work with the sacred plant medicines like Ayahuasca, Peyote, San Pedro and La Trensilla has helped him to get to know himself and overall helped him to become a better person. However, this work has helped as he said “more than anything, to get to know my roots. It has made me examine, who am I? Where do I come from? I have had the possibility of investigating, or feeling that I come from the Incas... As Saraguros we have been brought from Peru, Bolivia. That is the hypothesis of the origins of the Saraguro. So, this has made me reflect, but more specifically feel that it is indeed so.<sup>6</sup> Because yes, I have Inca blood, not in its totality, not in its pureness, but in part. Then from there, getting to know myself, I have been able to value, like in this case as indigenous, as a Saraguro, with my hat and my poncho. Now I am in a way rescuing the language, our foods, our music and our dance and all of these values of identity”

He went on to say that “So, this has given me a great satisfaction in a way, that the medicine has helped me to see, made me aware, made me think and reflect, that I am a person, but that I distinguish myself from others by our culture, by our identity.” This he said, now helps him to share with others and to motivate and incentivize the youth in the school where he works as well as in his own community, to maintain, and try to rescue, all these values of their identity and their culture.

### **5.3 Rethinking the Occidental and the Andean worldview**

Although Luis and his family are definite pioneers in working with the ancestral medicine, the first step towards this journey was taken by Ángelitas brother Polivio. Ángel Polivio Chalán Chalán works as a teacher at ‘La Universidad Nacional de Loja’ in the field of anthropology. There he specializes in ancestral knowledge, the Andean cosmology, The Kichwa world and the Kichwa language.

#### *Interview 4 - Polivio*

As Polivio told me in an interview, entering the process of working with the yachak in the beginning of 2000s marked the commencement of a completely new period in his life which entailed a new way of thinking and acting. This change came about after suffering a serious

<sup>6</sup> Luis told me that he and several of the people he was participating in medicinal ceremonies with, had indeed had visions of encountering Incas. He is currently underway with a book project where he will be telling about these encounters with accompanying drawings as illustrations.

health problem that the doctors could not help him with. The desperation he felt from not getting help from the doctors motivated him to look for answers in a new direction and after getting recommendations from some friends and his mother he decided to look for a yachak.

As he says, previous to this, the yachaks were people that had always appeared as mythical to him and he did not believe in, nor appreciate them. The reason for this he told me was that “because all throughout my formation in school, in high-school and in the university, I had absorbed the Occidental way of thinking. And the Occidental perspective said that the Andean perspective and the ancestral knowledge is completely useless.” This he said, in addition to the fact that the yachaks were also associated with witchery at the time, strongly influenced his thinking towards this topic. However, pushed by the health problem he was experiencing he had to venture into this new field and he began seeing the yachak Lucho. As Polivio started working with Lucho he felt the healing effects of the San Pedro cactus as well as the other medicinal plants, and thanks to this medicine he managed to heal from his health problem.

This experience he said, had a profound effect not just on his health, but also on his own thinking, which ultimately affected his work at the university as he started to look at it with the eyes of a teacher. “I had been a teacher since 1989, and so as I was a teacher, I took notice that this also could be a good strategy to educate people. I then started to create projects in education from the [Andean] cosmology, from the ancestral knowledge.” Since then he has continued his career at the university with a great passion for pursuing the recuperation and spread of the Andean cosmology and ancestral knowledge, currently being involved in the research project about ancestral rituals and knowledge in Saraguro, as well as having published the book ‘Pachakutik La Vuelta de Los Tiempos’ in 2011.

As I asked Polivio why people in Saraguro are recuperating their ancestral medicine and their cosmology just now after 500 years of repression by the Spanish, he told me that there are 2 elements to this. The first he said is that they are in the beginning of what he calls a new ‘pachakutik’. “The belief of our ancestors is that every 500 years there comes a great transformation. Some 500 years you live this way, and in the next 500 years you live another way. Now we are exceeding the 500 years since the arrival of the Spanish, so now we are beginning the next 500 years. The new ‘pachakutik’. So, this pushes people towards becoming interested in retaking this knowledge.”

The second element, he said, is that there are many people who do not find answers in the Occidental perspective. “The occidental perspective, in my view, came this far but now it has met a roof. It doesn’t go any further. This is how far the capitalism came. Mining exploitation, industrial exploitation, contamination of the climate, of the air, of the water. And with this, little by little the planet is poisoned and this will be our end. This is how far it has gotten. So, many people that does not want it to end this way, also look for an alternative. And they find this new alternative of retaking the ‘pachakutik’ of the ancestral villages”.

#### *Interview 5 - Sisa*

I also interviewed Polivios daughter ‘Sisa’ about the topic of the ancestral medicine. Sisa is 31 years old and works among other things with an architecture company after having finished her studies at the university. She told me she had been participating in the plant medicine ceremonies since she was 10 years old and seemed to have quite a bit of experience with the ancestral medicine although she told me she was no expert on the matter.

As I asked Sisa the question of how the ancestral medicine had affected her life, she told me, “Well, I think that it gives you another perspective on life. For example, there are things that logically and rationally wouldn’t make much sense. However, within this other world it makes a lot of sense. For example, considering the *mal aire*<sup>7</sup> and these things. Thinking logically, it doesn’t make much sense that if you go out for example in the night it can give you an *aire* and that this can affect your health for example.”

Then as I proceeded to ask her about how has the plant taught her this perspective, she answered. “When you drink [San Pedro], it’s like it opens your mind towards new fields. So, as you internalize this, it makes you more sensitive towards these other things.”

As I asked her which role going to these ceremonies play for her path with the Andean spirituality, she answered, “It serves the function of, for example affirm some of the things I

<sup>7</sup> The literal translation of the term ‘mal aire’ would be ‘bad air’. It signifies, “A disease caused by strong winds experienced while the person walks down a hill, by contact with cold air when the person leaves a sheltered place, or when a person walks through cemeteries or places where there are hidden treasures.”, (Armijos, Cota, Gonzales, 2014, p.6).

am thinking. Or, I don't know, for filling me with energy to keep doing the things I am doing. In some cases, or if I am sick, for example to do a purification.”

During this interview, I started to think that one of the reasons that the ancestral medicine had such an empowering effect on these people's relationship to the Andean perspective was that it seemed to open their minds towards phenomena that go beyond the rational logical perspective that the reductionist scientific perspective endorses. The experiences these people were having during the plant medicine ceremonies seemed to free up their minds to entertain and acknowledge new ideas that previously had been disregarded as impossible during their formal education in school and university, thinking back to what Polivio had told me in the interview he gave me. In light of this, I started to think that the plant medicine might serve the function of in a way legitimizing some of the concepts in their cosmology that go outside the norm of what is accepted as possible in the reductionist scientific worldview.

#### **5.4 Connection to nature**

In the interviews I did, a central theme that kept coming up was that the relationship the people I interviewed had to nature seemed to be profoundly affected by their experiences working with the sacred plants. Most of the people reported that it had led them to get a more respectful relationship towards nature. As Sisa told me, the San Pedro cactus had led her to feel a part of nature rather than as being above nature.

As I asked her if she thinks San Pedro is a plant that can help people to gain a more respectful and close relationship to nature she answered, “I think that in a way yes. Well, it is one way to do it. However, for others, for example I know people that do a lot of meditation, that also concentrate a lot on these spiritual ways but do not drink anything. But I think that it [San Pedro] can be a tool that maybe makes you internalize a bit faster. Or it makes you think in another way, but by another path.”

##### *Interview 2.2 - Amawta*

When I asked Amawta this question of how the power plants like the San Pedro has affected his relationship with nature he told me that for him, it has helped him to connect with the elements as well as having guided him towards spending more time outside in nature.

As he said, “What it [San Pedro] teaches you, it's like a guide, for example it can tell you ‘you feel more free in nature so you should go more often out to the natural world.’ ”. As he

told me, the natural element he identifies most with is the wind and that he therefor often goes out to places where the wind is blowing, like out in the fields, or on a mountain. “Then it’s like I feel free. I feel that I can fly and so it’s like a feeling that it has given me, to feel free, to feel happy in myself. And yes, it has given me a lot of feelings when there is a lot of garbage around and when they are cutting down the forests. It really worries me and I’ve thought that I can’t fight with them because they’re not going to understand me.”

Throughout my fieldwork it became increasingly clear to me that the perspective they had on nature seemed to differ greatly from that typically established in the hegemonic reductionist scientific perspective. One of the differences that struck me as quite unique was that they perceived everything in nature to be animated in some way or another.

As the father in the family, Luis, taught both Western and Andean philosophy at his high-school, I thought it to be fruitful to ask him about what he regarded as the main differences regarding the perspective on nature that the two paradigms hold.

### *Interview 3.2 - Luis*

Luis told me that in the Andean world everything in nature is considered as biotic beings, which is to say beings with life. And if it has life, he said it has energy and a spirit. The water, the wind, the plants and the mountains etc. are thus all conceptualized as living beings. As he explained, in the scientific view on the other hand, you separate the elements in nature in to two groups; you have the biotic beings with life, and the abiotic beings without life, and that with this understanding the water for example, is simply a chemical component consisting of hydrogen and oxygen. In this way, he told me, the universal science is cataloged more as knowledge of matter. However, in the Andean Cosmology the water is animated, and is something that humans can relate with on an energetic level. From this understanding comes a deep respect for the water not just as an element and a resource, but also as a spirit which they refer to in the case with water as ‘Mama Yaku’. Luis told me that if you whole heartedly address ‘Mama Yaku’ she will respond to you. He told me that one can ask her for example for healing and she can help you. So, when he for example has a headache he sometimes pours water on his head and ask her to help him heal, and the pain passes. However, if you act in bad ways he said, she can also affect you in a negative way.

As he puts it, “Our cosmology is based in this spirituality, that, we relate with all of the spirits, which is to say the energies, and from there we can balance ourselves. If I’m sick, I am

feeling bad, I ask the energies of the spirits, the spirit of the water, the wind, the earth, that of the plants. They are spiritual beings that give me this energy and I can find balance.

Conversely, in the Occidental understanding, I think that, a plant is a plant, it's a living being obviously, but I think that in the Occidental understanding one does not say that a plant has a spirit, or this animal has a spirit, or going even further the water has a spirit or this rock has a spirit. No, this is maybe something absurd even. So, this is maybe a bit of the fundamental difference that is most deeply rooted.”

## **5.5 Flipping the omelet**

### *Interview 6 - Inti*

Among the people of the younger generation I encountered, the person with the most knowledge and experience with the ancestral medicine was the next to youngest son in the family, Inti. It so had it that ‘Inti’ (21) was currently undergoing an apprenticeship with the yachak ‘Polivio’ from ‘Fundacion Salud y Nueva Vida’ that is located close to Inti’s home in Ilincho. He had been in this apprenticeship for the last 5 years, going to participate in healing ceremonies held every second week for people from both within and without their community. As I was witnessing several of these ceremonies I saw how there were many young people participating, and that a number of these were, like Inti, on the path of learning to manage the ancestral medicine. Inti told me how the resurgence of the ancestral medicine is very much connected with a process of turning the tables after the colonization period. Because up until the turn of the millennia the indigenous people had continued to be oppressed and subdued by the religion, by the priests and the mestizos. As he told me, the group of people that are on this path is still small, however the number is growing.

As I asked him about the attitude that the youth that are on a similar path as him, as well as the general youth in Saraguro have towards the reemergence of the ancestral medicine he told me: “So, we are in the middle of flipping the omelet (Spanish idiom corresponding to ‘turning the tables’) and the youth that are trying to understand this is a small number, and there are many that do not care about this. The trends/fashions, and the global systems also influence you, maybe the perspective of the youth here is that they want to seem like the famous ones, like the towns in other places, like in the Occidental world. So, the youth in many places are lost. It’s like they don’t know. But we are staying, and the elders are teaching us, how we need to walk [on this path], and when they go away, we will continue. And we will continue doing this job, we will keep waking up people, lifting people up, helping to cure people.”

As Inti was a person that had participated in countless ceremonies with the San Pedro plant, I was interested in finding out what he considered to be the most important teaching it had brought him. What he told me, was something I also heard from his younger brother Amawta that one of the fundamental things it had helped him with is facing his own fears. However also interestingly, fears that he had inherited from his predecessors.

“So, the [main] teaching I’ve learned with the Aguacola would be to break fears. What keeps you from being yourself, are a lot of fears. This is also something that are the tests of the medicine. Sometimes a thought reaches you which tells you, this is what you are afraid of, but this is exactly also what you need to break free from. And when you break it, you feel more free. And because of all of these things that has happened in the history of my family, the colonialization and all of this. It has reached a point where it has become genetic fears. And also fears that I have acquired throughout the course of my life. This I think, it has thought me. To go breaking these acquired fears, to go deeper and break these fears that have been there since my ancestors. And here I am, there are still some fears, but we are here to go breaking, breaking and breaking. We are in the process of flipping of the omelet. And now, we have to, which is a bit difficult, break these fears to be able to transmit to the next generation, this new knowledge without being based in fear. So, here we are, walking, in this path of becoming free.”

## **5.6 Ancestral medicine vs the pharmaceutical companies**

Although the plant medicines like Ayahuasca and San Pedro have become legal to use in a traditional setting in Ecuador in recent years, it is still prohibited in most countries in the world. I was therefore eager to hear Inti’s opinion on why these plants have been prohibited for so long, and remain illegal in most countries.

“Well, I think that the prohibition of these plants, in part, are in the hands of the big industries. Because in this period there are many people that are waking up, that know they can heal themselves, that the natural plants, and natural processes, even though it’s maybe a longer process, they can help you to heal completely. And this doesn’t agree with the big pharmaceutical companies, and therefore they don’t permit that certain things come out. Another reason are the stereotypes, like that these are drugs because they contain psychoactive compounds. But these psychoactive compounds are exactly what help you to deepen into yourself, help you open the veil so you can understand yourself. So, these stereotypes prevent the plants from reaching the world and that the world can be free again.”

This tendency of reluctance and opposition to the pharmaceutical industry is not something that was unique to Inti, but something I experienced as rather common to the people on the path with the ancestral medicine. They were not completely opposed to the pharmaceutical medicine, however many perceived it more as a temporary fix that often did not go to the root of the problem. Their perception was that the ancestral and herbal medicine on the one hand might take longer to cure an ailment, but on the other, it is easier on the body and will have a lasting healing effect. Inti also told me that there are currently attempts being made to try to industrialize the medicine from plants like the San Pedro, and that there are for example people trying to convert it into a pill. However, as he told me, this is an incorrect way to use the medicine, because it is fundamental that one uses these plants in a traditional ceremonial manner to make them work in the best way.

## **Chapter 6: Theoretical Approach**

The impression I had after my fieldwork and later going through my data was that a sort of Andean pre-Columbian revival was underway and that the reemergence of ancestral medicine was in many ways contributing to this process. By referring to the data I laid out in the previous part, I will now present some anthropological discussions that I will use to support my argument of how the reemergence of the ancestral medicine is playing such a key role in the pre-Columbian revival.

The theoretical framework I will utilize in the following analysis have been based on quite different anthropological discussions that are nonetheless related in the context of my thesis. I will begin by looking at Charles Taylors brilliant essay “The Politics of Recognition” (1994) where he discusses the topic of how recognition, in the same way as it plays a key role for individuals, plays a vital role for a culture to exist in a healthy way. By drawing on this discussion I will look at how the plant medicine might be counteracting the oppressive tool of non-recognition utilized by the Spanish colonizers on the Saraguro.

To avoid slipping into the pitfall of simply highlighting cultural curiosities and idiosyncrasies I have attempted to identify how the data I have gathered is related to pan American, as well as global processes. To approach this wider perspective, I have been very much influenced by T.H Eriksens work on globalization, and have found his book “Overheating” (2016) with its explorations of the effects of accelerated globalization immensely useful. Getting an overview of some of the different global processes which is leading to ‘overheating’ which Eriksen so



accurately coins it, has allowed me to put the resistance towards global ideologies like neo liberal capitalism and the standardized reductionist scientific perspective, expressed by the people that are on the path with the ancestral medicine, into a larger global context. These developments do as we shall see, all play in to the pre-Columbian revival phenomena.

To get some historical and comparative context to my own findings I have been influenced by Jonathan Friedman's comparative analysis in "History and the Politics of Identity" 1992, on the ethnic revival and construction of Hawaiian and Greek identity. By looking at what has previously lead to such revival processes in different parts of the world, and in different stages in history, I could better contextualize some of the findings in a comparative manner by encompassing them in a wider geographical and temporal scale.

## **Chapter 7: Analysis**

### **7.1 The destructive and healing potential of recognition**

In his essay "The Politics of Recognition" (1994), Charles Taylor proposes that the identity and self-esteem of a culture, is in the same way as the identity of a person shaped in part by recognition and non-recognition by others. His argument is partly based on the theory from the philosopher George Herbert Mead, that individual identity is largely shaped by the recognition or misrecognition during our upbringing by who he calls the 'significant others', referring to the people closest to us in our formative years. Central to Taylor's essay however is the impact of recognition's opposite, which is to say 'nonrecognition'. "Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (Taylor, 1994, p.25).

As society has been moving away from a strict hierarchical structure where peoples identities are fixed by their hierarchical position, towards the more egalitarian model of modernity, the ideal of authenticity has become extremely important for both individuals and whole people to define themselves (Taylor, 1994). The ideal of authenticity holds that a people need to be true to their own originality, to realize a potentiality that is properly their own to assert their own nature. When this authenticity is misrecognized however it can inflict a person or a people with deep wounds an even a crippling sense of self-hatred (Taylor, 1994). Regarding indigenous peoples, he writes "It is held that since 1492 Europeans have projected an image of such people as somehow inferior, "uncivilized," and through the force of conquest have often been able to impose this image on the conquered" (Taylor, 1994, p.26).

The story that Polivio, the university teacher, tells about the way he was given a negative and distorted view of the Andean knowledge, philosophy and healing techniques during his education, is an example of how non-recognition used by the colonizers has been engrained in the culture in Saraguro. By being told that all of this is to be regarded as useless and nonsensical, and in the case with some of the healing traditions that it has been associated with witchery, points to a rather systemic form of non-recognition where it has reached the very educational systems he grew up in. For the people growing up surrounded by these distorted assumptions of the authentic Andean values and practices, it naturally follows that it will be problematic for them to relate to these parts of their identity.

So, how can indigenous people that are facing this reality of systemic oppression escape the prison of in-authenticity and the self-hatred that it sometimes can lead to? For a subjugated people to neutralize this weapon, Taylor refers to what writer Frantz Fanon proposes in his book “The wretched of the Earth”, that “These latter, in order to be free, must first purge themselves of these depreciating self-images” (Taylor, 1994, p.65). This exactly seem to be one of the central themes of the movement of people working with the ancestral medicine in Saraguro. As Inti says in his interview, the revival of the ancestral medicine has a lot to do with turning the tables after the colonization. That they are trying to de-colonialize their minds liberating themselves from the fear that the colonizers brought with them.

In regards to the work of healing the wounds from the misrecognition, it can seem that the ancestral medicine has a great potential. According to the Chilean psychologist Fernando, one of the main proponents of the San Pedro cactus is its potential for helping one love and accept oneself. This element might indeed be working to counteract the symbolic violence done through the systematic nonrecognition that the university teacher Polivio described. Further on, as the plant medicine ceremonies are leading to increased curiosity to explore their cultural roots as we have seen, it might indeed be helping these people to recover the authenticity that Taylor deems essential for asserting a unique identity. This might go to the heart of what Luis is expressing when he says that the ancestral medicine has made him able to value his own indigenous identity as a Saraguro.

## **7.2 Globalization, homogenization and distinguishing**

One of the essential developments of the contemporary globalized world is that the citizens of most nation states are becoming increasingly similar in several cultural respects. This is achieved through such things as the process where the citizens are being increasingly

integrated into standardized educational and political systems, as well as the integrative effects of capitalism (Eriksen, 1991). In his book “Overheating, an anthropology of accelerated change”, however, Eriksen argues that “Whereas globalization makes us more similar in many respects, since we increasingly participate in the same systems of production and consumption, and are more aware of each other than before, people try by all means to be different.” (Eriksen, 2016, p.105). Thus, as globalization is fueling the process of homogenization it is at the same time increasing peoples need to assert their own difference. As Eriksen writes, the process of accelerated globalization is indeed stimulating people to define and assert their own uniqueness, separateness and even historical rootedness (Eriksen, 2016, p.102). Thus, what this global development often can result in on a local level is an increasing need to defend the endemic values, practices and as well as evoking discussions about a peoples’ historical past.

In his article “History and the Politics of Identity” (1992) Jonathan Friedman analyses the revival of the cultural past of the Greeks and Hawaiians in the present. As he writes, the Greeks, by pointing to the glory and essence of ancient Greece, and the Hawaiians the pre-colonial Hawaiian culture, the first encountered the possibility to free themselves from the hegemonic culture of the Ottoman empire, and the latter that of colonized Hawaii. This lead them to work towards reconstructing what they asserted as their authentic cultural roots and establishing a self-centered autonomy. The engagement with this self-defining project is a very meaningful endeavor and something of increasing importance for minority groups around the world as many are beginning to resist a historical past that has been defined for them by outsiders, most often by European colonizers (Friedman, 1992). Having a strong historical rootedness is naturally important for a culture to rest upon. However, building this foundation on a past of 500 years of subordination by the Spanish colonizers is obviously quite disempowering and hardly something the indigenous people of Saraguro and elsewhere in the Andes wants to define themselves by. And with the current homogenizing effects of globalization it becomes increasingly important to find positive and strong ontological foundations to assert their indigenous culture.

It here becomes interesting to consider the interview with Luis, where he makes the claim that one of the fundamental effects of his work with the medicine has been the way it has helped him to value his own indigenousness and specifically his understanding that he and his people are partly descendant from the Inca’s. Having an indigenous identity rooted in the prestigious Inca empire is obviously an empowering element, especially when contrasted to the inferior

image the colonizers have imposed on the Saraguro. The fact that he now finds pride in being able to distinguish himself from others by identifying as a Saraguro indigenous, demonstrates that the meaning-change and rediscovery of their Inca ancestry, reinforced partly by the work with the ancestral medicine, is having a profoundly empowering effect on his cultural identity.

### **7.3 Emerging alternatives in a time of declining Western hegemony**

When analyzing the case of the Hawaiians attempt in the second half of the 20. century to create a self-defined Hawaiian identity, Friedman argues that an essential element of this process was the decline of Western hegemony at the time. He claims that it is in the periods of declining hegemony that cultural heterogeneity and new ways of cultural identification gets the possibility to flourish. Thus, the increasing resistance towards modernism at the time of this process gave the Hawaiians a genuine chance for self-defined cultural identification (Friedman, 1992).

”In this current era of roots, *Dances with Wolves* and the ethnification of college curricula, emergent cultural identities represents alternatives to a modernism that has apparently failed.” (Friedman, 1992, p.132). It is no secret that the hegemonic narrative of modernity is currently facing a lot of resistance having to answer for the grave environmental and humanitarian crises currently rampant in the world. One of these problematic areas is the neo liberal capitalist system with its fundamental presupposition that for the world economy to function in a healthy way it is necessary with continued overall growth. This presupposition is something an increasing number of economists are deeming impossible (Eriksen, 2016, p.12). “This is a central conundrum of contemporary modernity, making conventional Enlightenment industrial ideas of progress and development far more difficult to defend now than just a generation ago” (Eriksen, 2016, p.12). Continued growth on the one hand and sustainability on the other, are showing themselves essentially to be very hard to pair.

This central conundrum that Eriksen is pointing out is expressed in the interview with Polivio where he explains that one of the central elements pushing people towards recuperating their ancestral medicine and spirituality is that an increasing number of people are not finding answers in the Occidental perspective. As he lists up all the destructive consequences, like industrial exploitation and environmental degradation etc. that he attributes to capitalism and the Occidental perspective, he says that this pushes people to look for an alternative. Thus, it can seem that the negative consequences Polivio attributes to capitalism and the Occidental

perspective, is making for a fertile period for a cultural revival. Thus, one can argue that the resistance towards modernity is fueling the need for a new narrative to follow.

As we have seen the Andean Cosmology is closely intertwined with the philosophy of Sumak Kawsay which currently is spreading all throughout Latin America as the psychologist Fernando had told me. In her article about Sumak Kawsay “Sumak Kawsay o Buen Vivir, desde la cosmovisión andina hacia la ética de la sustentabilidad” Maria Duran Lopez proposes that Sumak Kawsay is a potent alternative to the neo-liberal capitalist ideology of our society and can be a remedy for the environmental and human crisis in countries in South America. Lopez argues that a key aspect of the environmental and humanitarian crises in South America stems from the distorted view that the European colonizers brought with them of placing mankind above, instead of on an equal hierarchical position as all other parts of nature.

In light of this, it can seem that the community of people working to revive their pre-Columbian culture that I stayed with in Saraguro, rather than being an isolated case, is indeed a part of a pan Latin American phenomena of communities coming together to join in on a common path of aligning themselves with an alternative to the hegemonic ideology. This alternative narrative promises a better life for people and a more harmonious relationship with nature with focus on sustainability, built on ancestral knowledge from the Andes and other indigenous traditions in Latin America.

#### **7.4 Contesting the biomedical perspective**

Another euro-centric narrative that is being contested with the emergence of the ancestral medicine is the medical perspective that the Europeans brought with them to South America. Before the advent of the biomedical era the only form of medical treatment consisted of the use and knowledge of plant medicine in addition to primordial surgery and healing ceremonies (Leonti, Casu, 2013). In the introduction, I was explaining the term *curandero* which is often used to describe the different folk healers in the Latin American world that has been facilitating healing since long before the arrival of the Europeans and the biomedical era. A key factor in the majority of the so called “traditional” or local medicine is the way in which a holistic perspective on human health stands central (Leonti, Casu, 2013). The word *curandero*, stems from the Spanish verb ‘curar’ which means to cure. In English, to cure, signifies the act of curing, but can also mean the act of healing. In the Merriam-Webster English dictionary the definition of the verb *heal* is: *to make free from injury or disease: to*

*make sound or whole*. The curandero is dealing with both at the same time. He can of course work to cure an isolated ailment, but he is also facilitating ‘healing’, which is to say reestablishing the holistic nature of a human. In the film, when Inti says “the plants make you more human”, he is pointing towards this fundamental aspect of the ancestral medicine.

The biomedical understanding of health that the Europeans brought with them not only to South America but all throughout the world, entails the perspective that the body is made up of individual parts that work together as one complete organism. If one part of this organism is broken or defect, a doctor can help the patient by curing the individual part that is causing the problem. The curandero can, and does work in this way as well. However, he is also addressing the person as a whole being, to help the patient reestablish harmony. In my time in Saraguro, I was told that the yachak operates with an understanding of a person as a unity of four bodies. A physical, mental, emotional and spiritual body. This understanding can differ with different types of curanderos from different healing traditions, but the principal understanding of a person as a collection of much more than just the sum total of the physical body parts is quite common.

This perspective of multiple bodies, implies that the curandero will look much further than just at the individual physical body part that is in need of curing. He might look at such aspects as a persons’ family history, their diet, their emotional state, their relationships to other people or even elements and beings in nature. To help the person recover to complete health, or ‘wholeness’, he will try to aid the person in reestablishing harmony in the areas where there is an imbalance. My knowledge of the ways of the curandero is far too limited to make any claims about how they actually work. What is relevant here however, is to emphasize the fundamental distinction between the biomedical perspective on health, and that of the curandero.

This alternative perspective on health and healing can be seen in connection to the reluctance towards the pharmaceutical medicine and its associated industry that I outlined in particular with the interview with Inti. By reviving the ancestral medicine, the people I was with in Saraguro are indeed in a process of contesting the hegemonic biomedical perspective that has cemented all throughout the world. This no isolated case, but can rather be seen in connection to a global development of great interest in alternative practices and views on medicine that is on the rise in the contemporary world. One of the reasons for this development is that current

globalization is furthering an interchange between local and global pharmacopoeias through international business interests, but also internet and other media (Leonti, Casu, 2013).

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

The aim for this thesis has been to investigate the effects of the reemerging ancestral medicine on the current revival process of pre-Colombian indigenous culture. My main point of departure has been following a Saraguro indigenous family that has, and still is pioneering a process of resurgence of ancestral medicine. The main methods I employed during fieldwork have been participant observation, interviews and film as a tool. I found each of these methods to be greatly beneficial as well as complimenting each other by filling in the gaps where the others fell short. Out of the material I brought home from fieldwork I have produced both a written thesis and a film, which in a similar way can be seen to complement each other. Having had the ability to express my findings by two such different modalities have allowed for not only explaining my field of study in detail, but also to ‘show’ what I have witnessed. I perceived this to have given a more comprehensive and nuanced way to present my research.

As we have seen, the resurgence of the ancestral medicine is very much connected to a process of de-colonialization after 500 years of colonial oppression. For the group of people on the path with the ancestral medicine in Saraguro, this resurgence can be tied to a multiplicity of phenomenon that when seen in a local, global and historical perspective is pointing towards a meaning change towards their own unique indigenous culture. By neutralizing the systemic non-recognition imposed by the colonizers and sparking a revived curiosity and appreciation for the Saraguros’ pre-Columbian roots, the practice of ancestral medicine is counteracting the process of acculturation and stigma that has been historically facilitated by the colonizers. By helping them to rediscover and integrate these roots as parts of their cultural identity, the ancestral medicine is additionally counterbalancing the acculturation process that comes with the homogenizing effects of globalization. As we have seen, their pre-Columbian spirituality and healing traditions which previously were sources of stigma is rapidly transforming into cultural emblems connected to strength and pride, lending themselves to work as possibilities for distinguishing themselves, in a time of global cultural homogenization.

By catalyzing a new paradigm which entail an alternative way to look at humanity's relationship to nature, health and healing, the resurgence of the ancestral medicine and spirituality are contesting European cultural exports such as the system of neo-liberal capitalism and the biomedical perspective based in the scientific reductionism. At a time of increasing resistance towards neo-liberal capitalism due to the grave social and environmental problems it is often perceived to be responsible for, the narrative of Sumak Kawsay and the Andean cosmology are emerging as an alternative story to follow. This narrative suggests a better way to live with a more harmonious and sustainable relationship to nature and fellow humans, built on ancestral knowledge from the Andes and other indigenous traditions in America. As we have seen, by aligning themselves with the narrative of Sumak Kawsay, the Saraguros on the path with the ancestral medicine are not only locally breaking away from their old ties to their former European colonizers, but are indeed connecting with a movement stretching all the way throughout the American continent.

The scale of this project has been rather limited, as I have focused on a minority within a single indigenous group. However, the findings suggest an interesting possibility of a further study of investigating the seemingly widespread movement of indigenous in America that are coming together in a collective project to reawaken their ancestral traditions in an effort to share, spread and realize a new story to follow.



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Figure 1 - Armijos, C., Cota, I., González, S. (2014). Traditional medicine applied by the Saraguro yachakkuna: a preliminary approach to the use of sacred and psychoactive plant species in the southern region of Ecuador. In: *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, 10: article number 26. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/1746-4269-10-26>, [Downloaded 6. May 2020].

Figure 2 - Døvigen, M. (2019), “The Ushnu”.

