

From Demonic Agency to Divine Presence: A Study of Human-Entity Relations at an Ayahuasca Treatment Centre

Based on a minor field study in Tarapoto, Peru 2013



Master's thesis by Christoffer Stuveback

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Supervisor: Christer Lindberg

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**Department of Social Anthropology
Lund University**

Abstract

The present thesis is a qualitative exploration of a group of patients' experiences of going through an ayahuasca treatment as well as the human-entity relations they come to be constitutive of during the treatment. The ingestion of ayahuasca allows the drinker to enter a non-ordinary reality which opens up the possibility of having encounters with demons, spirits, angels, saints, animals and God, as perceived by informants. The findings presented here are based on seven weeks of fieldwork at Takiwasi, a drug rehabilitation centre in Tarapoto, Peru, and entailed ethnographic interviewing and participant observation of patients currently at the centre. By widening the notion of 'the social', of what constitutes social relationships, using Hallowell's concept of a behavioural environment as an environment inhabited by entities of different classes - affecting actual behaviour - the agency and characteristics of entities are delineated. The conditions under which these entities come to be as agents are connected to certain cultural variables of the centre: the religious-spiritual milieu on the physical premises in Catholic iconography and edifices, activities such as Christian prayer, mass and use of items during ceremony, and the amalgamation of the Amazonian spirit-world and the Catholic belief-system in Takiwasi philosophy. The latter allows for both spirits of different orders and Christian personages – Jesus, Mary, and other saints - to be at play and present simultaneously, in ceremony and outside of it. It is concluded that the entities encountered have a crucial importance for the lives of informants and are felt as just as real – though different in form and substance – as any relationship.

Key words: Ayahuasca, anthropology of religion, religious syncretism, human-spirit relations, demons, Amazon, Peru

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1. Introduction

As far as we have come in the study of the lives of our anthropological subjects, there hovers within the discipline still a feeling of unease as to how those lives are academically digested, and the final accounts of them presented. This even more so within the anthropological areas of religion and spirituality, areas somehow relegated to an empirically unreachable 'supernatural' domain of human experience.

For many (if not all) people around the globe, immaterial forces and beings have direct or indirect impact on their individual and collective lives, whether the former are benevolent, malevolent, or neutral in that sense. That is, they are perceived as agents, capable of action, embedded in social relations and interactions with human beings, as well as constitutive of them. Furthermore, as social agents they have their own histories, motivations, and ways of doing things. In this rather novel area of anthropological investigation, what should be of interest to anthropologists then, apart from the ontological status and social existence of these entities, is what happens in the crossroads where they meet with our human subjects, as well as the tracing backwards of interconnected histories of entity and human subject. This entails contextualizing the experiences of our informants, their interactions with and proximity to certain entities, in order to grasp the meaning and importance they carry in the lives of those experiencing and interacting with them.

I conducted my fieldwork at a drug rehabilitation centre in the Peruvian Amazon where one of the main pillars of treatment was the ceremonial ingestion of Ayahuasca, with the aim of not only relieving its patients of drug addiction, but also to provide space for spiritual growth. During my time there I inevitably came in contact with and interviewed people telling of weekly encounters with benevolent spirits, demons, Christian personages, and even God. The small group of patients was a rather heterogeneous one, with patients from Peru, other South American countries, and Europe. Their own highly individualized life histories - coming from different ethnic, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds - made their experiences of these encounters and interpretations of them differ to a degree, while there were also substantial commonalities to the majority of them. The research also saw the actual effects, such as formal religious baptisms and changed spiritual worldviews, as a result of these experiences.

Within the range of entities encountered the most active of these are demons. Living in and of the body of the patient, they are incredibly cunning, with a vast knowledge partly due to the interconnected history with the person they are attacking and possessing, and they employ

several different modes of attack. They act as both instigator and parasite, inducing as well as feeding on personal deficiencies and self-harming behaviour. A strong true belief in God is seen as a major defence in demon encounters, and generally the faith of informants did grow during the time of the treatment. The agency of Christian personages or saints are generally more passive, though no less powerful, bringing peace, strength and tranquillity to the persons in their vicinity, while at the same time seeming to keep demons at bay, just by their mere presence.

God, when appearing, acts in several different ways: offering protection and scattering evil forces, giving advice in critical moments of unbearable challenge, granting his power for a definite amount of time, as well as possessing the body of the person in the encounter.

Encounters with animal spirits often seem to provide space for reflection about personal characteristics, strengths and deficiencies, but also about the sameness of animal and human through experiencing the consciousness of these other life forms thus allowing embodied knowledge of what it is to be living, in the widest sense of the world.

1.1. Purpose and research questions

One aspiration of this thesis is to provide ethnographical material in a way that portrays the experiences of informants having entered into a reality that is completely alien from the ordinary one we inhabit in our ordinary everyday lives; one in which contacts with entities of a different order are commonplace; in which spiritual insights force themselves upon you, sometimes violently; in which both good and evil powers dwell and are present; and in which intelligence seems mysteriously inherent. It is outright impossible to do justice to the richness, beauty and horror that this other reality interchangeably contain, but that is in part what I have set out to do here.

Secondly, this is an exploration of the agency of spirits and other entities through the impacts and effects these have on humans within the context of ceremonial ayahuasca use, and moreover in their lives outside of this context. This entails staying close to how informants themselves view and talk about these entities - their characteristics, their histories, their ways of acting, the actual 'work' that they do as autonomous agents. In this vein the thesis tries to move beyond the notion of entities as solely mental constructs, symbols or concepts in order to examine them as behaving subjects affecting behaviour.

Thirdly and related to the above, this thesis will look at the relationship between informants and entities through a widening of the notion of sociality, of what constitutes 'the social' and social relations, by including extra-material forms of sociality. Thus not only

human relations, but also relations with different classes of entities, are viewed as essentially social.

Research questions guiding the thesis:

- Under what conditions are entities perceived as having agency and what does this agency look like?
- In what ways do informants orient themselves towards entities and what are the practical consequences of these orientations?
- What cultural variables affect experiences during the ayahuasca ceremony as well as outside of it?

1.2. Material, limitations and delimitations

The core of this thesis is based on 22 interviews conducted with patients at the Takiwasi centre during my seven weeks of fieldwork there. Apart from the material gathered from these interviews, a second way of collecting information was through casual conversations with the same patients, concerning at times the same questions and issues as the interviews, and at times the general and particular personal histories of the patients. There are some obvious limitations to the interviewing as a method in general, and even more so in a case like this as the subject matter that is the centre of attention during the interview is not at all visible for an observant, and so it becomes more difficult to cross-reference that which is observed with that which is heard and told.

Field notes were taken about the infrastructure of the centre, the structure and premises of the treatment, such as the different phases, rituals and scheduled events within it, and the everyday life at the centre. This material has found a complementary rather than fundamental application in this work bringing some added ethnographic flavour to the account.

Even though Takiwasi is a centre for drug rehabilitation which involves much personal and psychological work related to drug abuse and its underlying causes, this thesis does not dwell deeper into that area. As to the great amount of psychological material that surfaces during ayahuasca-induced states, the data concerning this aspect will only be related when relevant to the purpose of the thesis. In other words, the thesis is concerned principally with religious and spiritual experience, human-entity encounters and relations, and the agency and characteristics of these entities.

1.3. Earlier research

Ayahuasca, its use and context has been studied and approached from many different angles and by many scholars from distinct disciplines, due to the very richness of its being. These can be said to focus on three different contexts: the traditional shamanic one and the use of ayahuasca within it, contemporary use among mestizo populations, and contemporary use by Westerners, though within the framework of shamanistic ritual.

Many of the general public owe their introduction to shamanism and its use of mind-altering drugs to Carlos Castaneda and his book *The Teaching of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* from 1968, in which he describes himself becoming the apprentice of the Indian sorcerer Don Juan. Though fascinating as it is at times, it has been criticized from within the discipline of anthropology for not fulfilling ethnographic criteria (Bowie 2006: 192f).

Within the more traditional anthropological society, the studies of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975) focus on the use of ‘narcotic drugs’, among them ayahuasca, by Colombian indigenous groups, and his work *The Shaman and the Jaguar* is primarily descriptive, focusing on the traditions, rituals, and native interpretations connected with drug use and the hallucinatory sphere. Luis Eduardo Luna’s work *Vegetalismo: Shamanism Among the Mestizo Population of the Peruvian Amazon* (1986) is an important and major work that thoroughly discusses mestizo shamanism in the Amazon, its development from tribal to contemporary use, the concept of illness, and provides rich ethnographic material on cosmology and the spirit world, ceremonies and ayahuasca visions through the eyes of his mestizo shaman informants. Maria Dobkin de Ríos has also written several on the subject, including one important work, *Visionary Vine: Hallucinogenic Healing in the Peruvian Amazon* (1984), on the role of ayahuasca within the context of mestizo healing, based on fieldwork in Iquitos in the Amazon, discussing concepts of illness and witchcraft, and proposes how it is similar to forms of and can be used in psychotherapy. Bourguignon (1979) also conducted her research within the framework of psychological anthropology, and though not focusing exclusively on ayahuasca, discusses and compares altered states of consciousness cross-culturally, proposing that informants’ experiences during drug-induced states are patterned beforehand and so certain expectations follow into those states.

One of the most recent works is Shanon’s *The Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience* (2010) which approaches the ayahuasca experience from a cognitive-psychological-phenomenological perspective, and though not within the anthropological tradition, provides a huge amount of visions as experienced by his informants in a contemporary context.

1.4. Disposition

After this introduction I will in chapter 2 put forth some general background information about ayahuasca as substance and thereafter its use in traditional and contemporary societies, respectively. This will be coupled with some general descriptions of the type of shamanism related to it. Chapter 3 discusses the actual fieldwork conducted at the Takiwasi centre in Tarapoto, Peru, the primary methods used to gather data, some problems and issues that presented themselves while there, and then continues on to a short discussion about representation before ending with some information about the informants whose experiences make up the basis of this thesis. Chapter 4 delineates the methodological choice of a pragmatics of religious experience and entity agency and discusses its underlying philosophical and epistemological assumptions. Chapter 5 puts forth the analytical framework of the thesis, beginning with Hallowell's concept of a behavioural environment which is used throughout the whole work, discussions and definitions of possession, and then finally a note on altered states of consciousness and the cultural structuring of the same. Chapter 6 is strictly ethnographic and goes through the different phases of the treatment starting from the arrival of the patient. Chapter 7 delineates the Takiwasi philosophy, its underlying premises of treatment and its religious-spiritual framework before it goes on to describe the behavioural environment of Takiwasi (and the entities inhabiting that environment). It will then go through the different phases of the actual ayahuasca ceremony, all the time with the religious-spiritual framework in mind. The chapter ends with a short summary of some cultural variables of Takiwasi which to some degree pattern altered states of consciousness and experiences during ceremonies, which is the matter of the next part. Chapter 8 starts the suite of analysis of demon agency and informants' experiences, orientations towards the demons and actions within the context of demonic presence. Chapter 9 continues by taking a look at the agency of benevolent entities such as God, saints and spirits, also through the lens of different modes of orientation towards them. Chapter 10 intends to illuminate changes in informants' religious and spiritual worldviews during their time at the centre. Chapter 11 picks up the pieces of the prior analyzes and provides a concluding discussion of the thesis' findings.

2. Background

In the following section I will provide some basic information about ayahuasca as substance and thereafter follows a delineation of ayahuasca use and shamanism in a traditional setting. Finally, the contemporary form of ayahuasca shamanism, vegetalismo or mestizo shamanism, will be presented.

2.1. The Amazonian brew ayahuasca

Ayahuasca is a psychoactive brew which is used among indigenous and mestizo¹ populations throughout the entire Upper Amazon, and has been used by indigenous peoples in that area for at least hundreds of years² for a range of purposes, among them healing and divination, through contact with the spirit and plant world. Ayahuasca is a Quechua word meaning ‘vine of the dead (spirits)’ and ‘vine of the soul’ and has many more denominations depending on the region and the context of its use.

The concoction is generally made by mixing together and boiling two different plants, a jungle liana, or vine, *Banisteriopsis caapi*, and the leaf of a bush, *Psychotria viridis*, but several other plants are often added. It is the latter of these two plants that contains the psychoactive substance *dimethyltryptamine*, more known as DMT, which enables the visions experienced under the influence of Ayahuasca.³ DMT though, when ingested orally, is inactivated by a natural enzyme found in the stomach, which is why the mixing of the two plants is essential. The vine contains potent inhibitors of the same natural enzyme, preventing the breakdown of the DMT in the stomach thus allowing it to be absorbed and transported through the bloodstream into the brain, triggering the altered state of consciousness which allows access to a non-ordinary reality (Shanon 2010: 15).

The two plants, and others added, obviously contain a wide range of other substances, besides from having psychoactive effects, having physiological ones, which is why the brew is also used as a detoxicant and a purgative, that is, for ridding the body of physical ailments. Ayahuasca is often called ‘la medicina’ or ‘la purga’ interchangeably, emphasizing the medical aspects of the brew. The medical and physical effects should not to be viewed as completely distinct from other facets of ayahuasca use, such as the psychological and spiritual dimensions, which are highly related to the physical sphere. While vomiting or defecating one

¹ A person of mixed indigenous and European descent

² In the historic and archeological literature on Ayahuasca there are those who propose that the use stretches back thousands of years (Naranjo 1986)

³ DMT is naturally secreted in the human brain

is not only purging physical matter; mental and emotional release follow suit (Beyer 2009: 209).

2.2. Shamanism and tribal use of ayahuasca

Even though the aim of this thesis does not involve a deeper delving into the workings of shamanism and ayahuasca use among indigenous groups, I believe that a general introduction to the indigenous context and use is in place. Today's use of ayahuasca is in many facets derived from the traditional ones, and so it is in order to somehow briefly provide a picture of the process from its early to modern use, of the changes it has been going through over the years, to reach an understanding of what constitutes its contemporary use.

The use of ayahuasca has had and has an important role within many tribes and peoples of the Amazon region. Ingestion of the brew helps the shaman get in contact with the spirit world, and that spirit world also entails the world of the ancestors. With this being the general primary objective of its use, the reasons for ingesting ayahuasca are still manifold, with differences between distinct groups. Since it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore and compare these differences, a brief outline from some of the authorities on shamanism will have to do. Hultkrantz provides the following definition:

The central idea of shamanism is to establish means of contact with the supernatural world by the ecstatic experience of a professional and inspired intermediary, the shaman. There are thus four important constituents of shamanism: the ideological premise, or the supernatural world and the contacts with it; the shaman as the actor on behalf of a human group; the inspiration granted him by his helping spirits; and the extraordinary, ecstatic experience of the shaman. (1978: 11)

The last constituent mentioned, 'the extraordinary, ecstatic experience of the shaman' which is fundamental for entering in contact with the spirit world, is often achieved through the ingestion of psychotropic plant brews, such as ayahuasca.

Luna, elaborating on shamanic practice and its aims within the context of ayahuasca, writes:

It is believed that ayahuasca helps to explore the natural environment, its geography, flora and fauna. It allows shamans to diagnose illness, to find its cause - natural or supernatural - and to find a remedy for it. With the help of ayahuasca they can find game, discover the plans of enemies, find lost objects, communicate with distant relatives, travel in time and space. (1986: 60)

In other words, the altered state of consciousness in which the shaman temporarily immerses himself allows for him to enter the world of the spirits in order to gather information and knowledge pertaining to the well-being, security, survival and functioning of the tribe or group in question. There is also the feature of individual aid, in diagnosing illness and finding the right remedy for it.

Reichel-Dolmatoff writes about another function of the brew among the Tukanos of Colombia, which is getting in contact with the divinity and origin of all things:

Recognizing that the individual must pass from one dimension of existence – or cosmic plane – to another to communicate with the spiritual or invisible world, the Tukanos take caapi (ayahuasca) to effect this transport. The trip represents to them the process of birth and breaking through the wall that separates the two cosmic planes and signifies, according to anthropological studies, the rupture of the placenta. Drinking caapi is often interpreted as returning to the “cosmic uterus”. Since they insist that they sometimes come to know death while under the influence of the drug, the Tukanos consider the return to the cosmic uterus as an anticipation of death which permits contact with the divinity or visitation with the source and origin of all things. (1975: 45)

All things considered, there are a wide range of similarities as well as differences in the use, purpose and aim of the different indigenous groups using ayahuasca, but in all cases the brew (and plant) has a tremendous importance for them as a tool for entering the *real* world, that of the spirits, from where knowledge is derived (Luna 1986: 62).

2.3. Mestizo shamanism, or vegetalismo

Mestizo shamanism, or vegetalismo as it will hereafter be referred to following the work of Luna, is a continuation of the shamanism practiced by indigenous groups in the Amazonian region among its mestizo population, urban as well as rural, though highly integral to peasant religion. It has assimilated many of the key features of indigenous shamanism, while at the same time adapting and transforming them, incorporating new ideas and syncretizing them with other faiths and belief systems. One of the more prominent changes in the mestizo practice when compared to the indigenous one, is the shift from an emphasis on dealing with the group, towards an emphasis on dealing with individual healing, much a kind of change equivalent to that of some acculturated indigenous groups: “As a result of their impetuous acculturation, the shamanic activity of the Shipibo/Conibo Indians was robbed of the bulk of its public functions and reduced to the therapeutic sessions in which ayahuasca serves as a

diagnostic and inspirative vehicle” (ibid: 32). Healing in the mestizo shamanistic context does still include entering into the spirit world in order to manipulate spirit forces and through that way alleviate physical or emotional problems (ibid).

A *vegetalista* is a person who, more than only using plants for purposes of healing, has acquired and acquires his knowledge from plants and uses this knowledge and often those same plants for diagnosing and healing. This gaining of knowledge presupposes the supernatural world; the origin of knowledge is acquired through the *spirit* of the plant, or rather from the spirits of certain plants, also called teachers (ibid: 62).

According to Luna, *vegetalistas* in the Amazonic rural contexts “represent a case of transitional shamanism”, in-between indigenous shamanism and the more modern forms of practices in the urban areas, and also so in an economic sense, in that they are located between a subsistence economy and the market economy (ref). Within the category of *vegetalista* there are many subgroups, which I will not get further into here.⁴

⁴ However, for the purposes of this thesis, one of these subgroups worth mentioning is the one of *curandero* (healer), which happens to be the denomination of the persons leading the ceremonies at Takiwasi. According to Luna, a *curandero* is a practitioner in westernized societies, whose motives are vocational and humanitarian, and not social and religious (1986:33). Whether or not the *curanderos* at Takiwasi are also religiously motivated is however, debatable.

3. Being there

The greatest part of my fieldwork was conducted at the drug rehabilitation centre Takiwasi, located on the outskirts of the city of Tarapoto in the region of San Martín in the Upper Peruvian Amazon. Tarapoto is the largest city of the province, and though it could not be further away from being characterized as jungle due to its incredibly noisy and heavily trafficked atmosphere, it is on some sides closely connected to nature reserves and rainforests. Takiwasi thus, is only minutes away from the city, though also connected by dirt road to heavily forested areas.

I spent a total of seven weeks at the centre, between June and August 2013, and decided to spend the last week and a half with one of the master curanderos who had taught those at Takiwasi. This entailed about a 60 km and two hour drive to the village of Chazuta, then a boat trip about thirty minutes upstream on the Huallaga river to the place where the man and his family resided. The idea of going there had not been thought of before going to Peru. Rather, it was towards the end of my time at Takiwasi that I decided that it would be rewarding to see another side of the ayahuasca ceremony and use, in the context of the jungle instead of the therapeutic framework of the centre. In the end I did find it incredibly rewarding, as the ceremonies I attended in the jungle and the experience I had at Takiwasi were markedly different from each other, illuminating for me the different rationale, intentions, structure and outcomes of the ceremonies, though somehow overlapping. The patients staying at the centre and the few people staying with the curandero in the jungle inevitably had different reasons or intentions for attending ayahuasca ceremonies, something which both nuanced the information gathered and to a degree shed light on the importance of the influence of the setting on what is experienced.

In the following sections I will start by giving a short introduction to the Takiwasi centre. Thereafter the necessary preparations that were made prior to conducting my research will be put forth. The consequent section describes my way into the field as I arrived in Tarapoto starting to get everything in order. After that follow two sections on the methods used during my fieldwork, participant observation and ethnographic interviewing, and a detailed discussion on how they unfolded. The part discussing ethnographic interviewing has two subheadings, discussing open-ended and semi-structured interviewing respectively. Thereafter follows a discussion on certain issues encountered related to the fieldwork, as well as the issue of representation. Finally, some information about my informants is provided.

3.1. A short introduction to Takiwasi

Takiwasi opened in 1992 and is a “non-profit Civil Association that counts with the correct functional authorization, expended from the Peruvian Ministry of Health”. The research they conducted prior to the opening of the centre focused on the ritualized use of medicinal plants by Amazonian shamans, especially the one directed toward treating substance abusers, and this knowledge and practice has then been combined with conventional psychotherapy.

The centre accommodates about fifteen voluntary patients at a time and these are expected to stay for nine months (with rare exceptions to the rule), but are free to leave if they like. The team is cross-disciplinary, including doctors, psychologists, traditional healers and therapeutic assistants. Their treatment of drug addiction consists of three main components: 1) use of plants, 2) psychotherapy and 3) involvement in community life at the centre.

3.2. Preparations to enter the field

Before being accepted as a visiting researcher at Takiwasi there was some paperwork that had to be taken care of. Since I had decided that I wanted to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies at the centre myself, I was asked to provide personal information regarding three things which were mandatory for anyone wanting to participate, including the patients. First of all, I had to fill in papers on my medical history, including former or present drug use and experiences of altered states of consciousness reached either with or without psychoactive substances. Secondly, I had to write down my life history, that being major events experienced in and affecting my life, relationships with family and friends, love, personal problems and anxieties, and whatever else I felt was important for who I am, and for my life in general. Thirdly, I had to write a letter of motivation, elaborating on the reasons for wanting to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies and ingestion of other plants, along with the goals I had set up for myself. When these three documents had been sent in I had fulfilled the criteria up to that point and was welcomed to come and conduct my fieldwork.

3.3. Entering the field

Very much like Malinowski felt when he was dropped of on the beach in New Guinea far away from home, as ‘a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you’ (1922: 4), I felt quite lost as I arrived in Tarapoto. As I learned that same day that only patients were allowed to stay at the centre, I spent the first two days going through local newspapers looking for places to rent. After being helped by a woman taking me around the city, to parts too far away from the centre and to places without the necessities

and comforts such as walls without chinks, a toilet, lock and electricity, I finally found a room to rent, in the house of an elderly couple, on the same road where Takiwasi was located. Even though I was somehow disappointed with the fact that I would not be able to spend as much time as I wanted to with the patients, reducing the chance of being able to immerse myself in the group, I did understand the reasons for this and still found myself quite satisfied having ended up in the vicinity. The up-side of this arrangement was that I would be able to go back to my room, what came to be my office, as soon as possible after having conducted interviews, in order to elaborate on the information I had gathered.

There were initially some problems and confusion upon entering the field. Due to a misunderstanding between me and my contact person at the centre, he was on a trip out of town the day I arrived, and for a couple of days afterwards. At the time of my arrival, on top of it all, there were celebrations in town which meant that some of the staff at the centre did not work. All in all, filling in all the mandatory papers to be allowed to conduct my research, meeting with my contact and getting introduced to staff and patients before being let in on the premises of the patients, was delayed for about a week. It was not the smoothest start of my first real fieldwork experience.

However, a few days before actually being all set to start my fieldwork, I was allowed to join in on the weekly football game arranged for patients, staff and whatever outsiders who wanted to participate. Without any sort of clothing appropriate for sports, I nevertheless joined in, seeing an opportunity to get in touch with some of my future informants. With most people playing being about the same age, I had a hard time distinguishing the patients from the non-patients, and instead quickly reached the insight about the commonality of all those present. While taking a break, resting on the side of the field, I struck up a conversation with a European-looking guy who, as introduction, presented himself as a patient. Quite on the spot, we struck up an informal conversation in which he told me about the treatment, some of his experiences of being there, and to my dismay, that he was nearing the end of his time there and was about to go home. Nevertheless I gathered some initial information and an idea of what to possibly expect to hear from the others. This was partly true, and partly not so, as I would later listen to a wide range of stories containing elements of completely different backgrounds, conditions, intentions and experiences.

When a meeting with my contact finally was arranged, I told him about my intentions and the aims of my research, and he thereafter took me on a tour around the premises, presenting me to some of the staff, who all seemed to be quite in a hurry, while at the same time providing me with some ground rules to follow. The same day I had another meeting with the

head of the psychologist team who became the person at the centre to whom my questions and plans were to be communicated and addressed, in order for him to arrange and fit my wishes into the weekly schedules.

The following Monday I introduced myself and my purpose at the morning meeting held that day every week. Present were all the patients, some of the psychologists, some of the staff and other people interested and voluntarily involved at the centre. Nervous, I accounted for my presence there, my intentions of learning about their time in treatment and especially about their ayahuasca experiences, and was then greeted by applause and welcomes. The patients, some of them told me, were used to having researchers from different disciplines coming to interview them every now and then, but it seldom happened that they would stick around and take part of their everyday living. Hearing this, I felt somewhat encouraged and hopeful. After the meeting I spent the whole day tagging along some of the patients in their daily routines, mostly in the kitchen and on the communal porch and dining area, asking some not-too-nosy personal questions, general questions about ayahuasca and their experiences while under the influence of the brew, as well as telling them a bit about myself – trying, and intensely wanting to establish rapport.

3.4. Participant observation

Participant observation is said to be the cornerstone, or rather the core, of anthropology, as the immersion of oneself on a long-term basis in a place in order to investigate the way people live in that place, to take in their experiences and experience the field yourself in order to later represent it (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2009: 353).

The initial aim of my fieldwork was to spend as much time as possible with my informants to gain perspective on the lives they led at the centre, how the treatment was constituted, how the ayahuasca ceremonies they attended affected their life outside of that context, and ultimately and most importantly, what they did experience while under the influence of the ayahuasca brew. As Sluka notes, ‘The success of ethnographic fieldwork is in large measure determined by the ability to establish good rapport and develop meaningful relations with research participants’ (2013: 137), and to this end I followed the patients around all day, helping them as much as I could with whatever chores they were doing, making life easier for them, partly as a way for me to establish this rapport. I did also participate in workshops and activities of different kinds, meanwhile asking them questions about their ayahuasca experiences, their personal histories, and without any actual effort, getting to hear the gossip about what was going on at the centre, between patients and staff and between patients and

patients. Being in on the gossip to some extent felt like a win, as if I had gotten somewhat into the group.

As valuable as all this everyday 'hanging out' was for gaining general knowledge about the course of the treatment and the frictions within - and as mentioned in terms of establishing rapport in order for the interviews to flow more freely and with less obstacles - after a while I became quite frustrated with the fact that learning about the treatment as such did not in any major way help me to understand what was going on during ceremonies, that is, their psychological, emotional and spiritual experiences. Furthermore, no one was allowed in on the ceremonies, unless to participate, and anyhow I had started out with the idea that I wanted to gather information from my informants before actually attending a ceremony myself, so as not to put my own experiences and points of view as a frame from which to interpret the stories and experiences that they told me.

The main methodological issue that I was confronted with during my fieldwork and participant observation was that whatever I did and however I did it, I would never be able to actually observe what was going on when my informants had ingested ayahuasca. If I would have been accepted as an observer during the ceremonies, I would have been able to observe the structure of the ceremony, the performance of the curanderos, the behaviour of the patients and other participants. By having done this, and then by conducting interviews with the patients, I could have tried to put the pieces together; the pieces from what they said they experienced and the pieces from what I saw them doing. However, that would be quite an exercise in itself, and probably unachievable for me at that point. I decided then to put all focus on conducting interviews, which involved methodological issues as well. I will elaborate on those issues below.

To be honest, my own ayahuasca participation at the centre was rather brief. I participated in my first and only ceremony about half way through my time there. Just like the patients and other participants at the centre who were there with the purpose of drinking ayahuasca and other types of plant concoctions, I too was obliged to go through psychotherapeutic sessions with a psychologist to prepare for it. On the one hand this provided me with insight from a position not completely unlike that of the patients, discussing the personal problems and issues that I myself felt like dealing with during the ayahuasca ceremonies, with propositions from the psychologist on how to do this. On the other, it might temporarily have taken some of my attention off of the actual fieldwork, in particular after my participation in a ceremony in which I experienced personal hell beyond this world, catching me quite off guard, and left me shaken for some time afterwards. Besides, I was not at all satisfied with the therapeutic

follow-up of this experience, which was virtually non-existent, leaving me hanging in a state of unknowing.

However, the experience that I went through did bring much colour and contour to the stories and experiences told to me by the patients, since I now had actually seen and experienced first-hand demons in my proximity, as well as their wickedness and cruelty. While first having been told by some patients about them being attacked by and fighting against demons, in the multitude of shapes that these demons as well as attacks would take, it had before that moment been difficult for me to actually grasp anything of the kind, to fathom what these experiences actually entailed, but now they were finally making sense. However, even before my own experience those stories had fascinated me straightaway, and had come to lead me into another area of research, different from the one I had initially thought of – the novel one being that of the domain of ‘heaven and hell’ and encounters with beings both malevolent and benevolent. After having gone through hours of fighting with demons myself, or rather having gotten the living crap beaten out of me, the patients’ stories now made sense to me in an acute and concrete way, and allowed for further questioning in that area, with a widened understanding and appreciation of the phenomenon. This experience can be related to what happened to Edith Turner when she conducted her fieldwork in Zambia, when she during a healing ritual (without any mind-altering substances) ‘saw with my own eyes a giant thing emerging out of the flesh of her back. It was a large gray blob about six inches across, opaque and something between solid and smoke’ (Young & Goulet 1994: 83), a ‘visible spirit’, forcing her to consider whether the interpretations of those healers were in fact not accurate. The same must be said to have happened to me, in the sense that my otherwise quite atheist stance opened up and became more agnostic, allowing a wider appreciation of the phenomenon under study. However, the research would not necessarily be better if I took their actual existence for granted, as Geertz writes, ‘It is not a question of going native. It is a question of *living a multiplex life*; sailing at once in several seas (1988: 77) and so rather a question of fusing horizons (Gadamer 2006: 45), mine and those of my informants. In any case, my experience gave me a more privileged position for writing about the experiences of my informants. Once again in the words of Geertz, ‘the ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse, writes it down’ (1973: 19), and this inscribing would be more off the charts if I would not myself have experienced similar things as my informants had experienced, while also being able to discuss these experiences and putting them into the context of the accumulated experience of them all.

After my time at Takiwasi, as I mentioned earlier, I spent some time with a curandero some way away from the village of Chazuta. After having digested my ayahuasca experience and gotten back on track, I decided to participate in a few more in a setting different from the last one. There I participated in a total of four ceremonies, twice alone, and twice with one other person attending, that person being a different one each ceremony. These experiences were way more tranquil, without any demon encounters whatsoever, less psychological and more in phase and in connection with the natural environment around, which was also true for the other two participants

3.5. Ethnographic interviewing

Ethnographic interviewing is the main form of interview for an anthropological inquiry with the goal of eliciting the world and reality as experienced by those people we study. Heyl defines the ethnographic interview as ‘those projects in which researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their world’ (2009: 369). This definition implies two important criteria that have to be fulfilled: one quantitative, that the interviews should be conducted under an extended period of time, and the other qualitative, concerning the relationships *per se*.

Then, first and foremost it must be said that seven weeks, the duration of my fieldwork, is not really a lot of time. In my case, partly due to luck and partly due to the circumstances surrounding this particular treatment, a majority of the informants opened up quite quickly, without me having to really make an initial effort. People were willing to talk, also about things that seemed to belong to a rather private sphere. I can only speculate as to why, but in a place where only a dozen stay together for nine months, attending group therapy, much information about personal experiences is already public, so, yet another person wanting to know may not have been seen as a threat. However, even though people seemed willing to talk, and even though it seemed to me that they talked rather freely about both their experiences and views, it is important to have in mind that ‘interviewing involves a complex form of social interaction with interviewees, and that interview data are co-produced in these interactions’ and ‘that what the interviewees in each study choose to share with the researchers reflects conditions in their relationship and the interview situation’ (ibid: 370). For this reason I tried to communicate as early as possible that I wanted to know what they knew, exaggerating the fact that I knew barely *anything* about a domain of which they were

painfully aware and of which they had many months of intense experience. I also tried to conduct interviews in a casual tone, choosing a setting outdoors - the 'park' in which they lived - not wanting to add four walls and artificial sounds alien to their living environment to the interview situation.

Inevitably, there was the problem of establishing rapport with some of the patients, in part due to my inexperience as fieldworker. On the other hand, some doors were probably shut close due to me getting closer to some patients not much liked by others, or who at least were in some form of personal conflict with the same. This was a tough realization, knowing that you would not be able to get as deep under the skin of all of them, while this at the same time was an inescapable consequence of moving within a group of a dozen young persons living tightly together.

As noted, interviewing was the main method of data gathering, and inevitably so, since all experiences of the informants during the intoxication of ayahuasca were beyond my sensorial scope, that is, they were subjective to the highest degree imaginable, observable only by the individuals themselves (and arguably also to some degree by the curanderos). The possibility of observation 'from the outside' was also limited due to the fact that I was not allowed to participate in ceremonies without myself ingesting ayahuasca. If I would have been allowed in I would at least have been able to observe the corporeal reactions and behaviour of the participants in ceremony, though this would certainly have entailed its own methodological issues and problems.

The interviewing was divided into two phases. The first one employed unstructured interviews in order to reach a general idea of prominent themes, content and structure of experiences under the influence of ayahuasca ingestion, and the second one employed semi-structured interviewing which let me move further into more specific areas of research interest in a more structured manner. This second phase of interviewing then came to concern the more prominent themes emerging in the earlier interviews. The data gathered in the first phase of open-ended questioning thus allowed for the direction of research to crystallize, while the second one allowed for further probing into those research areas of interest following 'emic' concerns while not losing sight of or burying my own anthropological preoccupations. Entity encounters, demon possession and spiritual and religious experience - though not as categorically exclusive as they are put here - were what finally was to become the domain of study.

The guide informing the structure and *geist* of the interviews was Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979). Though his book may at first sight appear outdated and out-

of-context for the type of investigation here conducted, looking as it is to describe ‘cultural scenes’, its hands-on, step-by-step way of structuring interviews with the end goal of producing an ethnography has proved useful also in the ‘cultural scene’ of the ayahuasca experience, hidden from direct outside observation. He states that ‘the essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand’ (ibid: 5), which goes hand in hand with what I set out to accomplish with my interviews.

3.5.1. Open-ended interviewing

The first few interviews used as their starting point descriptive questions which Spradley divides into five different kinds. Not all of them are of importance here, and not all of them were used. One type of question is the ‘Grand Tour Questions’ (ibid: 86ff) and is basically a way of getting a general idea of the area of research the ethnographer is interested in, by asking the interviewee to describe, by giving a ‘tour’, the outline of a place and its events. The questions I would ask of this kind were: ‘Could you describe what *normally* happens during a ceremony?’ They would then go through the ceremony from when they drank the first cup of ayahuasca until the ceremony was over, sort of giving an overview of what had been going on, following their own interest and what they themselves felt to be important. Another question of this sort would be the *specific* grand tour questions which I often used as I could direct them toward the latest experience - expecting this to be most vivid in memory - or the most extraordinary and memorable one, whether this was recent or not. As anticipated, the latter of these two types of question elicited a lot of information, as these experiences were clearly unforgettable and still contained a lot of material fresh in mind. As you can already gather, descriptions of experience and ‘place’ (the ‘ayahuasca place’) unavoidably intermingled almost right from the beginning, due to the fluid perception of environment and self.

As anticipated, ‘responses to grand tour questions offer almost unlimited opportunities for investigating smaller aspects of experience’ (ibid: 88). For example, at the moment in which an entity encounter came up during a grand tour question, I asked the informant to describe this encounter, much in the same way that I did during the grand tour questions, only now as a more limited unit of experience. I then realized the multitude of encounters and entities, the different forms that these encounters took, the different ways the informants talked about them, which allowed for further probing in those areas.

Another type of question is the ‘experience question’ (ibid: 88). Though it sounds straightforward, in my case experiences were inherent in most given descriptions of

ceremonies and events therein, as a matter of course. What distinguished this question from the other types of questions when specified were the answers that I got from them, namely experiences in which there was not always a self-contained and easily identified entity present, but rather experiences referring to the transpersonal, to nature, or to visual or corporeal insights about the nature of being. These experiences often came with an air of awe for that something impossible to completely grasp and more so to explain and describe.

All in all, even though I tried to divide questions in order to reach certain kinds of answers, many of the answers to different questions overlapped, naturally, due to the non-exclusive and complex features of the distinct experiences, to some extent complicating the inquiry while also alluding to the richness and interconnectedness of the research area.

3.5.2. Semi-structured interviewing

After the initial phase of open-ended, though also guided, interviewing, certain key aspects of experience started to crystallize. I could then develop future interviews according to the themes that had come up, while still keeping the structure of the interviews flexible and fluid (Mason 2004: 212). It also allowed space for further questioning in areas that I felt like I had not quite understood, for clearing up misunderstandings, and for letting informants elaborate on what they had said before. This second phase also involved asking informants about their views on the ontological status of these entities that they encountered - their more explicit interpretations of them - and questions regarding spirituality, religiosity and faith in more general terms, in order to connect beliefs outside of the ayahuasca context with the experiences within it. It also entailed questioning regarding the 'spiritual development' that they felt they had been going through during their time at the centre, pertaining to actual events/incidents and changes in worldview.

3.6 Some issues

Most of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, a language that I at the time of conducting my fieldwork felt comfortable with, even though I was not quite mastering every aspect of it. This becomes a problem when you want informants to talk the way they talk, using their own words and their own concepts. However, most of my informants could also speak some English, which luckily for me helped avoid huge gaps in understanding, because they would gladly fill in or answer in English when I asked them to do so, or when they seemed to notice that I was lost. I also tried to pause when certain words that I felt were key words came up, asking informants to repeat and explain them to me. Quite rapidly, I also came to speak more

fluently, and learned how to listen to the kinds of stories told to me. Some of my informants were bilingual, speaking both English and Spanish fluently, and in those cases I chose to conduct the interviews in English.

One problem that became evident in the first couple of interviews was my inexperience in directing them, and maybe in explicitly explaining my research interest. Open-ended as they were, I was told many stories relating to psychological material and specific events related to them that came up during the ayahuasca intoxication, in many cases parent-child relations, family behaviour and violence. After realizing that much of the information given to me was not relevant to my study, out of bearing and scope, I promptly decided to make my intentions more clear in the beginning of every interview, which also made the informants more secure and confident in their roles as providers of certain kinds of information, thus becoming my teachers (ibid: 5) helping me understand.

3.7. Representation

If ethnography produces cultural interpretations through intense research experience, how is such unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account? How, precisely, is a garrulous, overdetermined, cross cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross purposes circumscribed as an adequate version of a more-or-less discrete “other world”, composed by an individual author? (Clifford 1983: 120)

This warranting, part of the post-modern critique of anthropology as a discipline concerned with issues such as representation, authority, power, voice and exoticism has been raised by several anthropologists (among them Clifford 1983, Geertz 1988, Marcus 1995, van Maanen 2011).

First and foremost, I do not pretend here to give an account of a ‘discrete “other world”’ as Clifford puts it, but rather I am trying to present certain individuals’ views on and interpretations of it, within its context. To this end I am trying to present differing views, and to the same end I gladly discussed these interpretations with my informants, in order to arrive at their ‘conceptions of the possibilities of being’ (Ingold 2000: 177), something that is at the core of this thesis. Thus maybe the area with which this study is essentially concerned - the ayahuasca experience and that ‘otherworld’ – is both a curse and a blessing, as the pretence of presenting it as discrete is doomed to failure and thus preferably avoided. Even so, representing the experiences of other people is in itself a precarious endeavour, though the

fact that the final representations of them in the end is filtered through me is, I would argue, inevitable and unavoidable, and all ethnographic data put forth and conclusions drawn are open to criticism from different theoretical or methodological stances.

Another issue worth discussing is the one concerning exoticism. It would be an outright lie contending that I was not drawn to this area of research in part because of what could be called the exotic elements of the world of ayahuasca, which when entered into shatters to pieces many of our modern preconceived ideas about the world we know or think we know. Though, yet again, one could argue that what we deem exotic is only another way of doing things, something that becomes natural to the ones doing them and in the end also to the one investigating it, the main difference being that it rests on epistemological (and occasionally ontological) assumptions different from the Western ones. In what follows I hope it will be clearly shown that my informants were, undoubtedly, ordinary people (though with serious drug problems), living temporarily in an environment providing access to extraordinary experiences.

3.8. Informants

As mentioned earlier, the constitution of the group of patients making up my informants at Takiwasi was of a heterogeneous nature. The 15 patients were all male, ranging from the age of 17 to 35, but the majority of them being between 19 and 24 years of age. About one third of them were of Peruvian nationality, one third European (all French except for one Swiss) and one third South American (Brazilian, Argentinean and Costa Rican).

The socioeconomic background differed within the group of Peruvians, and the individuals' drug problems were to some degree related to this background, while some drug use overlapped: three of them were middle-class youth from Lima, and their addictions consisted in abuse of cocaine (powder), marijuana and alcohol; one of them was from the underclass and one came from a family of peasants and both of them had abused cocaine paste, and been involved in criminal activity apart from the drug use. One informant, an ex-patient, was from working class origins, and had been involved with a wide range of drugs as well as alcohol. These three last mentioned had all begun using drugs in an extremely early age, much more so than the others. All except one of the Peruvian informants had grown up in Catholic environments. The one not so considered himself brought up in a non-religious environment. Before having gone through parts of the treatment, the informants from the middle-class considered themselves agnostics, the ex-patient atheist and the one from a peasant background Catholic.

Three of the European informants were middle-class, one upper-class and one working class. Mainly cocaine was abused by the one from the upper-class, while the ones from the middle-class were abusing marijuana, and one of them also experimenting with drugs of the LSD-type. The one from a working class background had been abusing 'all drugs that presented themselves' to him, arriving to Takiwasi addicted to heroin. This last informant had considered himself atheist before his time at the centre. The one having experimented with LSD had considered himself agnostic but searching, with explorations of Buddhism and other faiths. The one from the upper-class had considered himself non-religious rather than atheist, and so also the two last ones from the middle-class, even though they to some extent had grown up with Catholic families.

The informants from the other South American countries were all from the middle-class, had abused mostly cocaine (powder) and marijuana and had all grown up in non-religious families. One of them had considered himself agnostic, and was critical of organized religion in general, another believed in both God and spirits before his time in treatment, due to prior experiences of ayahuasca treatments, and the others had considered themselves non-religious.

4. Methodological pragmatics

In this chapter some methodological considerations and approaches crucial to the processing of the ethnographic material will be put forth and discussed. First a short note on the pragmatic method of William James is presented followed by some thoughts on its usefulness for this thesis. Thereafter follows an outline of the pragmatic approach to the study of entities and entity agency, somewhat in relation to James' method, elaborated to fit the anthropological inquiry.

4.1. The pragmatics of religious experience and human-entity relations

The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many?—fated or free?—material or spiritual?—here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? (James 1907: 199)

In what follows in this thesis much focus will be put on investigating the relationship between certain entities (demons, spirits, saints, God) and my informants who are having experiences pertaining to these entities in different ways. One can enter such an endeavour by postulating that these are all solely mental constructs, ideas or projections which seem to have a stronger hold over some individuals than others, and that the fact of the matter is that such beliefs are essentially untrue and mislead. After having conducted fieldwork among people who strongly believe in the existence of these entities due to intense and prolonged contact with them in different and distinct ways, and who are strongly affected by the ways these entities act upon them, I feel it as both an anthropological and a personal obligation to keep an open mind towards the ontological status of those entities, treating them as objects and subjects in their own right. Following this approach inevitably opens up for critique of being anti-realist, though whether the mentioned entities do exist or not, as James points out, we will never know, and as they do have profound implications for the lives of individuals they are not to be taken lightly and do merit or attention in a respectful way, also for the sake of anthropology as a discipline.

This approach does not propose an everything-goes attitude. Elaborated in the next section and coupled with the chosen theoretical frameworks the thesis takes into account and puts

strong emphasis on context and the circumstances under which entities are more likely to be accepted as having agency of their own affecting behaviour of informants. Thus it is not satisfied with reaching only an understanding of the phenomenon in question, but also intends to explain them in a methodical and systematic fashion.

4.2. On agency of spirits and other entities: a pragmatics of effects

The methodological approach of this thesis is based in part on an approach to the study of spirits and entities owing to the pragmatism of William James, elaborated by Blanes and Espirito Santo (2014) in the introductory chapter of *The social life of spirits*. The approach is used to explore conceptualizations of spirit or entity agency by looking at the effects these entities have in and on the world, that is, on the people whose world they (temporarily or permanently) inhabit.

The authors declare, and I with them, that ‘this exploration rests upon a philosophical and epistemological assumption, which is also a challenge: the recognition of the anthropological relevance of the mechanics and effects of so-called invisible or intangible domains, whether these are constituted by spirits, quarks, the law, or money value’ (ibid:1). This assumption in turn rests upon an idea that most of us hold, that there are things, non-perceivable and invisible to us that affect us as human beings in different ways, things that we cannot touch as we would otherwise physical objects. Entities, as other things, may be within our sensorial scope, or outside of it. Whether they reside inside or outside of it, this approach takes as its point of departure ‘the traces, symptoms, and effects they socially and materially engender’ (ibid: 3), thus allowing them to come into beings as objects for us to study. Accordingly, they are not principally explored as ‘concepts or components of given, shared cosmologies but as effects-in-the-world, with a potential for constant unpredictability and transgressiveness’ (ibid: 6). Entities here then, are not primarily formulated as purely mental or conceptual, nor do they imply ‘a necessary supernature or transcendent’.

The authors propose to

[...] work backward, from effects to form, from tangible to invisible, from motion to substance, from manifestation to agency, and so on – that is, to understand and define spiritual (and other non-physical) forms of existence as manifest (and ultimately knowable) through their extensions, if you will, on a social and even historical plane, where extensions leave markings, traces, paths, and, ultimately, “evidence”. (Blanes & Espirito Santo 2014: 6)

While the essays of *The social life of spirits* are all explorations of distinct intangible or invisible domains and their various entities, my field of research is not completely invisible in the same sense that these cases are. It is true that when dealing with experiences under the influence of ayahuasca things are invisible from an outsider's perspective, that is, publicly, though for the one who has ingested ayahuasca and entered into its domain entities of different kinds, though always intangible, may be both invisible and often are - phenomenologically speaking - visible. Nevertheless, when not under the influence of ayahuasca, whatever entities encountered in this earlier context cease to be visible, though they may still be present in a multitude of ways. The effects or traces of entities on informants may thus be said to follow into what we would call the ordinary world, with practical consequences for the ones having experienced them in the ayahuasca context. In a reversed way, these entities may already have entered the lives of informants prior to the latter's immersion into the ayahuasca context, in which these entities may then demonstrate themselves to the informants in the most apparent of ways.

5. Analytical framework

In this part of the thesis the analytical framework to be applied on the ethnographic material will be provided. The first section discusses Hallowell's concept of a behavioural environment (1988: 86) which is essential for the analysis of the Takiwasi centre and the experiences and worldviews of the informants. It takes into account all relations, also those constituted by non-human entities, as essentially social, affecting behaviour and having general importance in the lives of people. The second section provides information and definitions of possession and a concomitant discussion of its value as a concept. The third and final section emphasizes the importance of context by looking at the way cultural variables structure or pattern altered states of consciousness.

5.1. The behavioural environment and extra material forms of sociality

Irving Hallowell's concept of a 'behavioural environment' will provide the main theoretical framework from which to explore and theoretically analyze the data concerning experience and behaviour in the midst of the ayahuasca ceremony and its concomitant events and relations, as well as outside of it, e.g. when informants provide information and interpretations that are not related exclusively to that context but move beyond it.

The concept of a behavioural environment is distinguished from the idea of environment as completely external to the individual - the 'objective', 'geographical' or 'physical' world – as one with properties independent of the one perceiving and living in it. In contrast, the concept of a behavioural environment takes into account the properties of the individual and how these, in the interaction with the external environment, constitute the 'actual behavioral field' (1988: 86), of which spiritual beings of all kinds may well be part. He states that

[...] such objects, in some way experienced, conceptualised and reified, may occupy a high rank in the behavioral environment although from a sophisticated Western point of view they are sharply distinguishable from the natural objects of the physical environment. However, the nature of such objects is no more fictitious, in a psychological sense, than the concept of the self [...] and must be considered as relevant variables because they can be shown to affect actual behaviour. (ibid: 87)

In the same vein, the importance of another distinction is stressed. Just as the term 'physical' environment is based on the objective properties of the natural world independently of any one individual perceiving it, the terms 'social' or 'cultural' environment implicitly or

explicitly imply description of an actual environment - its structures and properties - in which the individual lives and to which she responds; an environment conceived of first and foremost as independent of the individuals, seen from an objective outside perspective. Instead then, Hallowell proposes that the environment in which humans live, experience and act may best be described as a 'culturally constituted behavioural environment' (ibid). This distinction is useful here because sticking to it will allow this study to stay close to the lived experience and reality of the individuals concerned without losing sight of context, and because it stresses an emphasis on that which is most meaningful and important to individuals/informants in their own lives, in the terms of their own thinking and experiencing, from an inside perspective. Furthermore, it gains double import due to the impossibility of outsider observation into informants' states during ayahuasca ceremonies, and the impossibility of producing a satisfying objective description of the 'ayahuasca environment' because of its extreme complexity.

According to Hallowell, people orient themselves to 'a diversified world of objects in its behavioural environment' (ibid: 91), meaning that not only the 'material' environment guides and constrains but that there may be important invisible dimensions doing so as well. James, discussed above, drives the same idea about these dimensions and their objects and their way of affecting us in a similar way: 'Polarizing and magnetizing us as they do, we turn towards them and from them, we seek them, hold them, hate them, bless them [...]' (2002: 65).

Orienting oneself to objects in these invisible dimensions provides a base from which to interpret events in the behavioural environment according to held ideas about the nature of these objects, and according to certain 'implicit or explicit dogmas regarding the "causes" of events' (1988: 91). The total content of the behavioural environment, then, is shaped in part by the orientations to these objects, and not by a pre-specified ontology (Blanes & Espiritu Santo 2014: 24f). This is important to hold in mind and will be tried to be shown in this thesis: entities encountered during the ayahuasca intoxication, not visible otherwise, become part of or are reinforced in the behavioural environment of the informants, affecting acts and thoughts both outside of that context, and when returning into it once again.

Interaction with objects in the behavioural environment, classes of objects - '*other selves*' - including spiritual beings, must thus be taken into account when we talk about social relations.

Viverio de Castro suggests that we have to look at 'social relations in all their variations' and be 'willing to admit that treating all relations as social may entail a radical reconceptualization of what 'the social' may be' (2003: 4f). Thus, once again following Hallowell, "social"

relations of the self when considered in its total behavioral environment may be far more inclusive than ordinarily conceived. The self in its relations to other selves may transcend the boundaries of social life as objectively defined' (1988: 92). In some cultures, and I add at certain moments and under certain circumstances in life, relations with other-than-human selves may be as important for the individual, or more so, concerning certain aspects of her life, than relations with other human beings.

The above leads us to note to another kind of orientation important for the individual in every society or culture:

Motivational orientation is orientation of the self towards the objects of its behavioral environment with reference to the satisfaction of its needs. [...] The satisfaction of needs requires some kind of activity. A world of objects is not only discriminated; objects of different classes have specific attributes that must be taken into account in interaction with them; even the valence they have for the self is culturally constituted. Some classes of objects may have highly positive attributes; others may, on occasion, or even characteristically, be threatening to the security of the self. (ibid: 100)

These two types of orientations – object orientation and motivational orientation - will function as analytical guides for the analysis of the ethnographic material presented in chapter 8 and 9.

5.2. Spirit possession

An important aspect of the ayahuasca experiences as told by informants during my fieldwork concerned spirit possession, whether by demons or other entities more benevolent. In the big scheme of things this aspect is essential for an understanding of the way informants conceptualized their experiences at the centre and in life, and so a delineation and discussion of the term will serve my purposes here.

According to Morris,

The term *spirit-possession* generally denotes the incarnation or possession of an individual by some spiritual being and not by some vague 'external forces'. According to the culture, the spirit may 'possess' or control the individual person in a number of different ways – it may reside in the head, 'ride' the individual as a horse, or a spirit might fully incarnate the person, taking full control of his or her body – and the person is 'seized' by the divinity or spirit. He or she then becomes a 'vessel' or 'temple' or the embodiment of the spirit. (2006: 22)

These possessing spirits may according to Janice Boddy include ancestors or divinities, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien. Depending on the context these spirits may be exorcised, be part of a more extended and stable relationship with the possessed individual, and under certain circumstances usurp 'primacy of place' in the body, temporarily in possession trance, the latter being expressed in altered states of consciousness. She adds to the description above an emphasis of the boundary-breaking and fluid aspect of possession: '*Possession*, then, is a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable' (1994: 407). This definition will be applied as a working definition for the parts examining these aspects of informants' experiences, partly because of the boundary-breaking focus which is quite inherent and strong particularly during the ayahuasca intoxication and within its entity encounters, and partly due to the sometimes fluid and interconnected dimensions of the corporeal and spiritual/hellish experiences during the same experience. Another reason for following Boddy is her acknowledgment of possession states as having 'potential to foster insightful reflection in the possessed' (Lambek 2009: 369).

Possession may be evaluated both in positive and negative terms in places where it occurs. A positive evaluation would follow the type of possession that in some way grants power, e.g. when (either animate or inanimate) power inhabits a person (Bourguignon 1979: 247). Important to note is Bourguignon's suggestion that we can only talk about spirit possession when the state of an individual is interpreted as such by other members of society. If the belief is absent from the population one cannot talk about possession (1976:8). In the case of my own material this view becomes problematic to stand by completely, that is, if the belief must be held unanimously. The group at Takiwasi was as mentioned earlier quite heterogeneous, and so opinions differed to some degree between my different informants on this point; the existence and agency of spirits are viewed differently, and so inevitably also views on possession. Views of informants from Europe for example, differed in some aspects from those of the South American ones. Thus I argue here that whether or not the whole population believe in spirit possession, the term will still be of use here, due to many of the informants' told accounts of being possessed, and since one of the tasks of the *curanderos* is to purge, drag out, or neutralize demons or malevolent spirits during ayahuasca ceremonies, thus providing and reinforcing this cultural interpretation themselves from the top. Furthermore, in

keeping with the pragmatic approach described above, entities will not be viewed necessarily as ‘given components of shared cosmology’, thus allowing us to move beyond this imperative.

5.3. Culturally structured altered states of consciousness

In order not to provide experiential accounts of events and encounters within the ayahuasca experiences devoid of context it is important to illuminate certain cultural factors or variables surrounding these accounts, without for that matter reducing the meaning and importance these experiences in themselves have for informants. Experiencing and interpreting experience is never done in a vacuum. Altered states of consciousness are always to some extent patterned beforehand. The induction of altered states of consciousness are also accomplished in different ways according to different contexts, ranging from fasting to drumming and onwards to the use of psychotropic drugs or plant concoctions (1979: 240f). It is this last state of consciousness that is in focus in this thesis, namely the use of ayahuasca.

Bourguignon provides the definition of altered states of consciousness as ‘conditions in which sensations, perceptions, cognition, and emotions are altered. [...] They modify the relation of the individual to self, body, sense of identity, and the environment of time, space, or other people’ (ibid: 236). I add, for the sake of clearness, that these are temporary alterations or modifications which return to a normal state when the effect of the brew is gone.

Different altered states of consciousness are according to Bourguignon contingent on the cultural context, that is, they are culturally patterned. The individual knows, to some extent, what to expect, the experience that is to come is never completely idiosyncratic, one must and has often before hand learned to have the appropriate experiences (ibid 239), thus, ‘*what* will be perceived and *how* it will be experienced is related to the cultural context and traditional meanings provided to the individual’ (ibid 242). One knows, for example, in the case of ayahuasca, that the experience will be private, that it will involve encounters with entities, that demons will be present, coming either from outside of, or from within the individual, that help from saints is invoked through prayers, etc.

6. Takiwasi living

The following chapter is principally descriptive in nature and serves to provide an idea of what it is like to live at the centre, to lead one's everyday life there so-to-speak, as well as to present some of the phases within the treatment. The first part deals with the arrival of the patient and his first days in isolation. The second part describes the initiation ceremony after which the patient enters the group of patients and their living quarters. The third part intends to show everyday life at the centre and the final part treats the diets that the patients go through in seclusion up in the mountains.

6.1. Isolation

Rites of passage are apparent in many communities around the world, and by viewing Takiwasi as just another such community, the way that the different phases of its treatment are organized become clearer. All rites of passage or 'transitions' contain three different phases: separation, margin and reaggregation. The phase called margin refers to the liminal state of the individual, its threshold status, that he is betwixt and between without a set position (Lambek 2009: 327). In the case of Takiwasi this transition seems to be at play at two different levels, one in relation to the society outside, and one in relation to the community inside. On the level referring to the outside society, the separation phase is when the patient leaves his regular life behind to enter the centre, the margin state or liminal phase is when he is undergoing the treatment, and the reaggregation is him returning and once again becoming incorporated into society, with a new status.

All of these phases are as mentioned also present in the community of the Takiwasi centre itself. Initially when the patient arrives to the centre he is thus not only separated from society, but also from the other patients at the centre, living in isolation for eight days on the other side of the premises from where the other patients live. So, within the context of Takiwasi, he is in the liminal phase waiting to get incorporated into the group, now as a 'passenger' who 'passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state' (ibid). This is the phase in which it will be ascertained whether or not the patient has enough willpower to stay through for the rest of the treatment, and the one during which most patients leave. During these first eight days the patient stays in a small simple white house with one bedroom bragging nothing more than a bedside table, a Bible and a wardrobe, and a small bathroom with a shower providing only cold water. In the 'hall' is a small sauna suited

for one person only, made of wood, in which a mix of vaporized herbs is used for helping to alleviate withdrawal symptoms when they tend to get very strong. Outside, on a small patio under the roof, is a rocking chair.

For some, the difficulty of being in the isolation is due to the withdrawal symptoms, for others the lack of cigarettes and yet for others the solitude and boredom. One patient described his time in isolation like this: ‘The isolation was severe for me, very difficult, I was not used at all to be by myself, I never used to be, and now I had to be alone for eight days. That was the worst part. I had strong withdrawal symptoms, shaking a lot, with cold sweats and crying. Everything hurt, the head, the shoulders, the legs. But always when you feel like shit you find something to comfort you. There was a rocking chair, and I could sit in it, moving back and forth the whole day, crouched together, with the sensation of having this big hole in my soul.’

On the contrary, some of the patients find the solitude positive, being able to read and reflect. The food rations seem a problem for most staying in isolation. The patient is only allowed breakfast and one more meal, consisting of over-cooked rice, carrot, peas and a piece of chicken, or a light soup. Many hours each day he spends working, raking the paths around the house or doing other chores, and is still not allowed to meet any of the other patients, though sometimes he spots them as they move towards the main building.

During time in isolation the patient ingests different plant concoctions, ‘purgés’, in a ritualized fashion, in order to speed up the detoxification process and to reduce withdrawal symptoms. From the moment he enters the centre, nothing will be ingested apart from what is prescribed by the staff, which means complete abstinence from all sorts of drugs, substitute drugs, tobacco, and even refined sugar. A psychologist comes by once a day, not in order for longer conversations to take place, but only to make sure that everything is going well.

6.2. Initiation ceremony

When the patient has endured the first eight days, he is initiated through a ceremony in order to become incorporated into the community living and the treatment as such. It takes place in front of the main building, and all staff and patients are present. Wood has been put in the centre, now burning, and around it are stones making a circle and one and a half meter or so away is another circle of stones, outside of which the initiate, quiet, as well as non-initiates are standing. The director talks about the meaning of the fire, how it represents cremation, purification, transformation. Another curandero and some of the staff also talk before the crowd, about the past, the present and the future of the individual, the treatment, and the

personal and spiritual journey that is about to begin, with the hope of finally finding God, an implicit if still powerful motivation of the treatment.

The initiate has brought a garment from his life before the treatment, symbolizing his past, or rather, the negative facets of that past. He has written down on a piece of paper all the things that he wants to leave behind, and after one of the patients removes a stone for him in order to enter into the circle, he starts walking backwards anticlockwise reading the note out loud for all to hear, with a shaky and nervous voice. When he is done reading, he describes what his garment represents to him, then throws it on the fire, and all stand in silence waiting for it to burn. When seen fit to recommence, the initiate is told to walk forward, clockwise, reading from the other side of the piece of paper about all things pertaining to his future: hopes, challenges, dreams.

When done reading, the same patient removes the same stone and the initiate steps out, starting to walk anticlockwise around the circle of people, one after one hugging him and saying 'welcome'. When the circle is completed, he is incorporated into the Takiwasi community and is now 'in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural type"' (ibid). Two of the patients help him get to his living quarters and from there on out, he has nine months of living at the centre in front of him.

6.3. Everyday life

An important part of the rehabilitation at Takiwasi is the communal living, everyday life. This is strictly scheduled and planned and means hard work for the patients. During weekdays, patients wake up at six o'clock, shower and dress, and makes themselves ready for the day. Two or three patients, usually scheduled beforehand for the whole week, prepare the breakfast that they all consume together at half past six at the communal patio connected to the kitchen and the living quarters. The rations are equal for all, but there are some exchanges of food between patients depending on tastes and personal relationships. Some have saved some of the food from the supper the evening before in order to enjoy a greater breakfast in the morning. After breakfast that ends at seven, patients spend an hour doing chores, usually cleaning toilets and showers, making dishes, etc. Five minutes to eight one patient rings the bell signalling to the others that the daily morning meeting is about to start. When all are gathered, the chief psychologist goes through what patients are going to be at which work stations, who has a meeting with a psychologist, who has other activities on the schedule of the day, including meditation, painting, Bible reading, handcraft, baking bread (in a clay

oven), life history writing, and more. Patients are supposed to attend all non-mandatory activities, but if there is one activity in particular that someone does not like, they are not forced to go.

Mondays and Fridays there is a morning meeting in the *maloca*⁵ closest to the patients' living quarters. On the Friday morning meeting they go through the week that has passed, what problems have emerged among the group, what they have felt that they have accomplished, etc. One patient is chosen to lead the meeting, and he will talk about his development during the time in treatment, on whatever subject he finds important. There is also time and space allowed to provide critique or praise of certain patients on their doings during the week that has passed with a discussion following on the subject, sometimes heated but always controlled by the staff.

On weekends they also have some chores to attend to, but less than normally, and more time to indulge in personal affairs; reading, listening to music (not allowed during weekdays), hanging out, playing football, etc.

6.4. The diets

Three times during the nine-month treatment the patients leave for ten days of what is called 'the diet'. This entails going to a reserve in the mountains, *la chacra*, owned by the centre, where they stay in huts isolated from one another. They eat light meals of over-cooked rice and green bananas, only once a day, and three times a day comes a 'helper' to bring them a plant concoction, different for each person depending on their specific purposes, e.g. plants working on the emotional, cognitive or spiritual levels, some producing visions, some allowing crystal clear thoughts, others letting the patient move closer to repressed feelings and emotions. In general terms, the ten days of diet are there in order to allow for introspective reflection in solitude and to deal with personal problems, but also to connect with nature and what is seen as its inherent spirituality.

Towards the end of each diet an ayahuasca ceremony is held in the maloca up in the mountains. According to patients, this natural and powerful setting of and backdrop to the ayahuasca ceremony increases the intensity and beauty of it, and many claim to have their strongest and most important experiences here.

⁵ Oval or round ceremonial open-spaced building

7. Takiwasi philosophy in theory and practice

The following chapter delineates the philosophy of Takiwasi: the underlying ideas about drug addiction and its relation to demon possession as well as the syncretization or amalgamation of Amazonian cosmology and the Catholic belief-system, that is, the distinct religious-spiritual framework of the centre. Thereafter the behavioural environment of Takiwasi is outlined exemplified through ethnographic material. The following parts deal with the actual ayahuasca ceremony, the practical doings within it in relation to the religious-spiritual framework mentioned. The last part is a summary of certain cultural variables - the context of belief – that pattern the altered states of consciousness. This last part serves as a backdrop to the two following chapters dealing with the ethnographic material of entity encounters.

7.1 Underlying premises of treatment and the religious-spiritual framework

As the treatment at Takiwasi combines what they call Western psychotherapy - both psychoanalytical and behavioral forms - and indigenous knowledge about plants and the ceremonial and partly cosmological context of the Amazonian ayahuasca tradition, two simultaneous discourses about the treatment and the reasons for drug addiction can be said to run parallel to each other.

The view among the staff working at Takiwasi, and most explicitly put forth by the director Jacques Mabit, is that drug addiction is the unfortunate consequence and ‘an attempt, certainly clumsy and sometimes extremely dangerous, of self-medication. Users may be responding to a real need to escape the constricting mud of a dry and devitalized lifestyle, one lacking exciting perspectives or room to blossom’ (Mabit 2001: 25f). Used here is the term ‘self-medication’, referring to the alleviation of psychological disorders or issues of whatever kind, but also incorporates ‘room to blossom’, which we shall see also refers to a spiritual dimension of growth. This is an attempt to combine medical and intrapersonal explanations for drug addiction.

On the other hand, more in accord with the shamanistic context and not put forth in academic articles, is that drug addiction is an expression of the lack of spirituality in the patient, and that this spiritual void is the soil in which wickedness may get rooted and grow. The spiritual void allows demons to enter the body, demons that consequently cause destructive behaviour in the individual, and feed on the negative behaviour already there. This seems to be a variant of the concept and sociospiritual condition of soul-loss, losing one’s soul or a part of one’s soul, often through the natural process of fright (Beyer 2009: 165, Luna

1986: 133), understood here as trauma in a wide sense, allowing illness (addiction and demon possession) to strike the person. According to Luna, 'evil spirits may also abduct the soul of a person during ayahuasca ceremonies' (ibid: 133), or, we would have to conclude, part of it, which does correspond to the idea of the battle between patient and demon at Takiwasi ceremonies where the battle between patient and demon is a battle over spiritual space, demons wanting to suck it out, feed on it, and grow stronger. Important to note here is that this partial soul-abduction by demons is at Takiwasi perceived not only as a feature of ayahuasca ceremonies but also partly as we shall see as the root problem as well as consequence of drug use when not executed in a controlled setting or in ritual.

Both among patients and therapists drug addiction is viewed in part as the result of the workings of demons, and so should be viewed in continuation of the belief among mestizo populations in the Amazon area that spirits may cause illness (ibid: 134). Addiction then, is viewed as containing a living dimension - one or more malevolent spirits - which in part must be fought alone and in part with the help of spirit allies, among them the spirit of ayahuasca itself, spirits of other plants, animal spirits, or earlier 'masters' now dead, such as Jesus. God, of course, is the final and greatest force and ally. These spirits are contacted in the world of the spirits, during ayahuasca ceremonies or during ceremonies revolving around other plants (not discussed in this thesis). Demons may be combated with the help of spirit allies, but also, as will be discussed below, through exorcism-like rituals within the framework of the ceremony. The final aim is to reintegrate the individual with his 'spiritual dimension', which entails cleansing the interior spiritual space in order for it to be allowed to grow without malevolent powers or presences overriding it, and to find cosmic connection. As one informant was told by one of the curanderos: 'Ayahuasca shows you your own spirit, and the interconnected one.'

To this end, the Catholic Church, or a religious framework based on it, is present at the Takiwasi centre. The centre is open to anyone, whatever religious belief or unbelief the individual may hold, but Mabit (director) concludes that the patient's process is facilitated if he has a spiritual orientation. The choice of the Catholic Church as the spiritual anchor of the centre is explained by the fact that this is the belief-system that is the closest reference to spirituality for the majority of people in South America, and also to some degree for people coming to the centre from Southern Europe. The Catholic Church remains a provider of important religious elements for and among mestizo vegetalistas, curanderos and the general rural population and these elements, as well as the autochthonous ones, are juxtaposed and reinterpreted within the new context (Beyer 2009: 331, Luna 1986: 30). Consequently, in

addition to the staff of curanderos there is also a priest working at the centre, whose role includes having weekly voluntary Bible groups with patients, providing one-to-one talks, arranging mass in the chapel of the centre prior to ayahuasca ceremonies, and also participating in ayahuasca ceremonies both as a force to call upon Christian saints (which the curanderos also do in the beginning of ceremonies) and to channel the power of God through faith and, when needed, to help the curanderos during exorcisms.

Within the vicinity itself there are many sites, objects, texts and references to Catholicism and Catholic saints. Apart from the chapel, which has a sign hanging from above the entrance reading ‘Virgin of Otuzco of the Door of Liberty’ [translation by author], there are two marked religious spaces. One of them, a prayer space, made by a former patient at the centre, is located under a thatched roof and contains a blue pillow on a blue stone on which one is supposed to rest one’s knees when praying in front of a figure of the Virgin Mary. Below there is a framed text that reads:

Virgen de la Puerta,	Virgin of the Door,
Madre mía Amantísima,	My beloved Mother,
Tómanos de la mano	Take us by the hand
En el camino de la Luz.	On the road of Light.
Acompañanos	Accompany us
En todos los instantes	In every instant
De nuestra vida	Of our life
En los momentos difíciles	In difficult times
Permítanos sentir	Permit us to feel
Tu maternal Consuelo	Your maternal Consolation

There is another similar place, though an altar, for petitions and offerings, under a thatched roof in which there is a figure of Saint Martín de Porres, holding a cross and a broom, and with a cross hanging on the wall behind it.

In the main ceremonial space, the maloca, in which ayahuasca ceremonies take place, the wall behind the spot from where the curanderos conduct the ceremony, are three iconographic paintings hanging on the wall. In the middle, is the ‘Stabat Mater’ altarpiece depicting the crucified Jesus, with Mary standing below on the left looking up, and John the Apostle crouching below to the right. The text surrounding the paintings reads: ‘Holy Image of the Lord of the Miracles – Illuminate Takiwasi [translation by author].’ Next to it to the left is an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and to the right one of Michael the Archangel.

Most of the patients also wear amulets of the Virgin Mary or some other Virgin saint and often Saint Benedict, generally used for fending of evil forces and the Devil, as well as a rosary. It is recommended that patients wear them, especially during ceremonies where they grant power and strength to the one wearing it. I was myself recommended by a patient to use one prior to the ceremony that I was to attend.

The presence of Catholic iconography, texts, sites, activities and objects intermingle, as described above, with an explicit reverence for spirits of different kinds. It is noted that ‘catholic elements are not always syncretically amalgated, but coexist hand in hand with Amerindian ideas’ and ‘complement each other as parts of a religious system’ (Luna 1986: 30). For instance, the spirit of Ayahuasca herself and her children in the form of other plant spirits are held in high regard but quite apart from Christian saints or personages, which I will return to later. On the wall by the entrance of the main building, close to an ayahuasca vine, is a piece of tile art depicting Mother Ayahuasca, a beautiful light-skinned woman with black hair adorned with a tiara with a star on it, arms held downwards and palms pointing up. She is dressed in a white long gown which is continuous with the sea in which she is walking at night, radiating light, with the moon and a few stars behind her in the sky. A text close to her reads:

En reconocimiento,	In recognition,
honor	honour
y meritos a la maravillosa y bondadosa:	and merit of the marvellous and kind-hearted:
Madre Ayahuasca	Mother Ayahuasca
Y sus numerosas hijas e hijos que nos fortalecen,	And her numerous daughters and sons who strengthen us
nos enseñan,	teach us,
nos protegen	protect us
y otros tantos beneficios que nos brindan	and many other good deeds that they offer us
Legítima curandera	Legitimate healer
Gracias Gracias Gracias	Thank you Thank You Thank You

A drawing covering the whole wall of the patio of the living quarters clearly and explicitly indicates the coexistence of Christian and Indiamerican religious ideas and motives. The drawing contains a beach of sand dunes from which a naked woman, once again Mother Ayahuasca, has entered the sea and reaches for the sky which is covered by a colourful rainbow with two ayahuasca vines twisting around each other above it and at the top a depiction of God behind a cloud reaching his hand, which is bursting of light, towards earth.

7.2. The behavioural environment of Takiwasi

The behavioural environment of Takiwasi is born out of two different domains which we could call the everyday or ordinary domain, and the non-ordinary domain of altered states of consciousness (e.g. the ayahuasca-induced one) , which are both part of the lived reality of the centre's patients. These two domains, coinciding with the individual living in and experiencing them, is what we would call the behavioural environment, or the actual behavioural field, of Takiwasi. Individuals are not being socialized and brought up in this environment from an early age and so have not spent their whole lives there. Rather they have brought with them the worldview from where they stem, and in a sense become re-socialized while at the centre, to a degree ontologically, when spending time in and intensely experiencing it. As mentioned earlier, the behavioural environment should not be thought of as the objective environment, but rather as an environment contingent upon the individual experiencing it. As noted, the group of informants is heterogeneous and so the behavioural environment of two different individuals may to some extent vary, or even contradict each other, especially in a case such as the one presented here. Below I will try to delineate a general outline of the behavioural environment while also allowing for discrepancies within it.

First and foremost, benevolent as well as malevolent spirits do 'occupy a high rank in the behavioural environment' for the majority of the patients at Takiwasi and 'must be considered as relevant variables because they can be shown to affect actual behaviour.' (1988: 87) Informants repeatedly gave information concerning their encounters (or proximity) with benevolent spirit entities both during ayahuasca ceremonies and in everyday life, even though the presence of these is way more pronounced during ceremony. The presence of demons is strongly pronounced in both cases, and these are perceived as dwelling sometimes in the individual body, sometimes outside of it, whether or not under the effect of ayahuasca. This is the account given by one informant:

I had just been in a ceremony a couple of days earlier and there I had fought with them [the demons], sweating and convulsing, trying my hardest to get them to go away. Eventually with the help of Jacques [a curandero] I succeeded. A couple of days later we were up at the 'chakra' [in the mountains], and I was really afraid to be alone in the hut, I could feel them around me for days, all day and all night. It really kept me on guard, made me focus on positive things to find the power to not let them get to me.

Another informant - the one with the longest history of drug abuse - perceived by staff and by himself to be deeply possessed by demons - was feeling their constant presence for the first

three months at the centre. The presence was felt most strongly while in bed; he felt them circling around it, even moving it (felt also by another patient), and they did not let him alone even in his dreams. He concluded during that time that this would be the greatest fight of his life and that he would get himself free from those demons.

The stories told by this man are the most extreme of all the stories told to me, and so also his encounters with demons which have the most hellish of airs over them. For him, the actual behavioural field is inhabited by demonic presences, around as well as in himself. This was so for many of the patients, though to a lesser degree, and it was often felt as reducing over the course of the treatment. Another informant, representing a more detached outlook on demons, had never felt their presence outside of the ayahuasca ceremony, but did see them during ceremonies. In these cases however, they were always 'outside' of himself, never his own, always in someone else or revolving around other patients. Yet another patient felt unsure whether or not demons were personal, or just 'out there' during ceremonies: 'If you have your eyes open then you'll see things, like demons, but I prefer to keep them closed, shutting them off and letting them be there, I'm a bit scared of them.' The same informant, when asked about presences at other times described how he, while being at the diet in the mountains, resting in his hammock, felt a hand pulling his pants and then explaining: 'If it would have been earlier I would have been really scared, but at that point I was kind of used to things like that happening.' Another patient, the only one from which I was told anything about *brujería*, witchcraft, told me the following story: The last day of the diet up in the mountains, after having eaten a broth in order to cut the diet, there were a lot of fireflies around. One curandero said that they were *brujos*, witches spying. When he had laid down in his hammock that night to rest, he felt that someone was choking him, he could not talk and even less scream. At the same time his body turned cold, and he felt naked and unprotected; 'I tried to inhale air, and when I finally heard that I sucked in energy they went, the devil went away, and I started screaming and a friend came running to see what was happening.' After this incident, he told me, he could not sleep for several days, having it constantly on his mind.

The presence of benevolent spirits in everyday life is felt to a much lesser degree, and informants have more difficulties explaining and describing it, other than as a connection with spirits at certain moments. This is also the case in the ayahuasca context, where they sometimes do appear very clearly though more often quite vaguely. Many informants explained this by saying that benevolent spirits do not have the need to show themselves in the same way as demons do, but that one knows that they are there when they are.

For many patients, though not for all, Christian saints and/or angels are part of the behavioural environment, either from before the treatment as part of their religious worldviews or from during the course of the treatment where they often do appear in ayahuasca ceremonies, in visions or as strong sensations accompanied by spiritual release or ecstasy. Among others these are Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Saint Michael, the latter Archangel. There are cases, though these are rare, where informants talked about events where particular saints were painstakingly present in other contexts than the ayahuasca ceremony, for example during baptisms.

The last category of entities in the behavioural environment of Takiwasi is the one of animal spirits, or power animals, which according to the interview data are encountered only during ayahuasca ceremonies. All these encounters with different entities (spirits, demons, saints, animals, God, etc.) and the different contexts in which they occur will be discussed later in chapter 8 and 9.

7.3. The ayahuasca ceremony

In this chapter the ayahuasca ceremony will be delineated in somewhat general terms, due to the ritual richness it contains, and will stop at elements, events and parts of its structure crucial for an understanding of the forthcoming interpretation and analysis of informants' struggles with demons and other aspects of demonic possession and presence, as well as of other encounters, including those with saints, and experiences pertaining to God. Thus, it will deal principally with the ceremony as viewed from the outside, that is, with the work the curanderos and the priest do and the different phases of the ceremony, and will at this point only superficially and generally deal with what is going on with and within the patients during the same. When the latter is done it is in order to elucidate the essential connection between the leaders of the ceremony and patients, as well as to provide this information prior to accounts of demonic struggles and possession states which otherwise will be (un)appreciated due to a lack of proper context. It also aims to illuminate the Catholic or Christian elements of the ceremony which, as will be elaborated and argued later, somewhat pattern what participants experience.

7.3.1 Preparations

As mentioned earlier, the ayahuasca ceremony of Takiwasi takes place in a semi-open spaced long house, the main ceremonial building called maloca. There are usually at least two curanderos present, one of which is leading the ceremony, but there may be present as many

as four at a time, along with the priest and an apprentice. The leading curandero is seated in the Eastern end of the maloca, below the Catholic icons, and seated closest to him are his helpers; to his left and right other curanderos, and on the seats next to the assisting curandero to his right the priest and apprentice. The patients complete the circle. The curanderos decide the order in which patients are to be seated beforehand. Usually, as one informant told me, ‘they put us demons together in the back’, referring to the fact that the ones most troubled by demonic presence and encounters are often seated together directly facing the leading curandero so as to easier being able to be monitored and helped when needed, as well as to keep them somewhat separated and from influencing those in the circle less prone to these types of experiences. Due to the ceremony taking place in the dark everyone wears white clothes in order for everyone to be seen more clearly. All of the patients have a bucket beside them in case of vomiting.

The curandero leading the ceremony sits on a low stool and has in front of him his *mesa*, table, a cloth put down on the floor on which he puts the instruments he is going to use during the ceremony. These are: a plastic bottle of ayahuasca; a gourd cup from which the ayahuasca will be drunk; a bottle of *agua de florida*, an ethanol-based cologne used to anoint himself and patients for protection and to reduce *mareación* (nausea, meaning the general effect) during ceremony; *mapachos*, thick hand-rolled raw tobacco, used for protection during ceremony, as well as for reducing *mareación*; a bottle of holy water; and his *shacapa*, a musical instrument made by bundled leaves which is used as a rattle during ceremony and provides the driven musical rhythm during the same, accompanying the *ikaros*, ceremonial songs for attracting spirits, while also for shaking it over patients for “cleansing” them of illness and evil spirits’ (Luna 1986: 145).

7.3.2. Securing the ceremonial space and the individuals present

During the first phase of the ceremony, when all lights have been turned off and all one can see is the occasional glow from a mapacho, the curanderos, priest and apprentice anoint their bodies with the cologne over the face, head, hands, neck and chest, basically all places on the body visible and further in, as protection against evil spirits who are said to hate the smell, and for attracting the benevolent ones who are said to like it (Beyer 2009: 18). When this has been done, a tray of slowly burning *palo santo*, holy wood, that gives off smoke is passed from the curandero around the whole circle, and every participant ‘baths’ himself with the smoke; in the face, on the chest, on the neck etc.

Thereafter comes the crucial moment of making the space safe. The curandero fills up the gourd with a small quantity of ayahuasca, sings an ikaro over it praising and calling the spirit of ayahuasca, blowing mapacho smoke into it, and then drinks it. He then begins singing an ikaro of protection called *arcana*, through which he calls the protective spirits (both animals spirits and spirits of the plants) to come and protect himself and the other participants from evil spirits and forces during the ceremony. Its goal, as one of Beyer's informants described it, is to 'erect a wall of protection a thousand feet high and a thousand feet below the earth' (ibid). It also provides individual protection, a kind of protective garment 'so that nothing evil may penetrate him' (Luna 1986: 90). When accomplished, invocations to Jesus, Mary and Christian saints are made, also as protective spirits, sometimes through Catholic prayers, sometimes through ikaros. These invocations are common among mestizo shamans and 'it is generally [...] agreed that Jesus is the Supreme Being' (ibid: 89) and also that the Virgin Mary, beside Jesus, is a powerful healing and protective spirit (Beyer 2009: 332).

Since I was not able to write any of the prayers down, immersed as I was in the ceremony myself, I will exemplify with one such prayer similar to those I heard, from one of Luna's shaman informants:

Divine Christ, Celestial Father, Creator of Heaven and Earth. With Your permission we are going to take this plant that You have put on Earth. We, Your earthly children, have discovered it, and we use it as a remedy in order to understand our bodies and the problems we might have among us. Father, let no evil spirit enter this circle. If any of those bad spirits come, throw them into the dark, squeeze them down with the Black Stone. The four angels will take care of the circle. [...] We cure ailing people as best we can. We obey Your command, Father. (Luna 1986: 146)

The ceremonies at Takiwasi, as among most others conducted among the mestizo population, thus 'have a marked ritualistic Christian character', though no prayer books or collections are present during them as they may often be during other both rural and urban ones (Luna 1986:141). Instead prayers are read by heart by the curanderos and the priest. Every ceremony ends with a communal prayer in which gratitude to God is expressed.

7.3.3. Invocations of protective saints through prayer, and spirits through ikaros

The invocation of the Virgin Mary, other saints or Archangels follows the same pattern as above. Different prayers are said during different ceremonies, depending on individual curanderos present and the one leading it. Furthermore, the curanderos and the priest take turn

saying them, just as they take turn singing the *ikaros*, and in this way repeatedly call upon protective spirits of different kinds as well as saints during the course of the ceremony. One of the *ikaros* sung by the one *curandero* leading the ceremony I attended ended it every time with the words: ‘Espíritu santo, iluminanos, y protegenos, en el camino de Dios’; ‘Holy Spirit, enlighten us, and protect us, on the road of God’ [translation by author], obviously calling out to God for his guidance and protection during the ceremony. Another one, sung by another *curandero*, combines once again elements of the Indiamerican view of earth and Mother *Ayahuasca* with Christian elements, the Virgin Mary and God. It is called ‘*Ikaros* of the “M”’, here translated by the author:

Mmm... mmm... materia...
mother matter, new and primal...
soft internal murmur... voice of the earth...
Mmm... mmm... matter...
my matter... other matter...
hand matter, new caresses...
music of the soul that love does not deny...

Mmm... mmm...
Essence of sun and stars,
Bridge matter between the Aeon and man,
Infinite cycle without time,
Repetition and instinct.
Matter of the word, energy born
For love of and for earth,
Through Mary, memory, woman mother
Warmth contained in her...

Mmm... mmm...
Mmm... Old song safe in the womb of man...
That to reach God one must learn to be man...
And to listen to the voice that does not come from the mind,
Neither from the mouth... mmm...mmm

As has been shown clearly in this and the previous chapters, the cosmological system and ritual practice embedded in *Takiwasi* and its ceremonies, just like the mestizo shamanistic system, ‘consists of an association with, on the one hand, references to the forest and ethnical

shamanic practices and associated representations and, on the other hand, the mobilization of tutelary entities borrowed from the ontology of the Christian religion' and that 'Christian naming is used to unify certain aspects of ethnical spirit profiles with those of Christian entities, such as angels, demons, saints, and devils' (Losonczy & Cappo 2014: 109f).

7.3.4. Handling patients

When the ceremonial space and the individuals present have been made safe through the above mentioned methods and through the presence of spirit allies and helpers, preparations are made for the patients to drink the brew. Thus, the curandero inhales smoke from his mapacho and exhales it into the bottle of ayahuasca. Thereafter he starts singing an ikaro over it, summoning the spirit of Ayahuasca itself. When this is done, the patients are called forth one by one. They sit down on their knees in front of him while he fills the gourd with the amount of ayahuasca deemed appropriate for the individual in question, blows mapacho smoke over it and then starts singing a short ikaro pertaining to the well-being of the person who is about to drink it, this ikaro being the same for all participants but with the name of the individual incorporated into it at the right time.

He hands the cup of ayahuasca to the person in front of him and then that person holds it in his hands for a few seconds while projecting his intention – what the person wants to learn or understand tonight – into the brew. Then he drinks it, hands it back to the curandero and returns to his seat. When all those present have drunk their share of ayahuasca, the curanderos will sing ikaros and continue doing this throughout the whole ceremony, and occasionally during the same a curandero will walk around the circle making sure everyone feels okay, not saying much, just showing himself, blowing mapacho smoke over the crown of the head, onto the back and the chest, and over the hands of the patient, in order to alleviate increasing nausea or to relax the person.

For some patients the effect comes rapidly, and some start to throw up violently. For others it takes a second round of ayahuasca, prepared in the same way as the first, and thereafter it does not take long until it has effect. After about one hour many have entered into a strongly altered state of consciousness and after about two all of them. For about five to seven hours they are immersed in this state, having all kinds of experiences imaginable ranging from re-experiencing traumas (detached from the emotional state of that particular trauma), thoughts and visions pertaining to family relations or psychological problems, to encounters with various entities and experiences in the spiritual, religious or mystical sphere, the latter being the centre of attention in this thesis.

7.3.5. Healing performances, or exorcism

During the course of the ceremony some of the patients will be immersed in states and experiences which they can handle themselves, with only the above mentioned support and treatment from the curanderos. Alleviating nausea, calming down and directing the flow of the psychological, emotional, and visionary states of the patient is done repeatedly in intervals during the ceremony, also through the singing of *ikaros*. Oftentimes though, some patients enter into struggles with demons. This is perceived as inevitable since, as mentioned earlier, the addiction is viewed as having a living dimension - these demons – which provides a concrete situation in which the patient may succumb to or temporarily conquer them. These struggles are sometimes fought without the intervention of the curandero, and sometimes, when it becomes clear that the anguish of the patient is too severe and the demonic presence too great, the curandero performs an exorcism-like ritual in which he together with the patient tries to get them out and away. Important to note here is that the curanderos know prior to it happening which patients are most prone to these experiences, and so are the patients themselves.

There are some obvious outside markers of when patients have these experiences. They may start shouting, or screaming, or hide themselves under their clothes, or explicitly cry for help. Sometimes the curandero comes to the patient to perform the healing/exorcism, or the patient comes to the *mesa* for it to be performed there, whether or not the demons at that point are present.

When a patient is immersed in the battle at his spot, the curandero thus comes to him. He interchangeably says Catholic prayers in a feverish pace, pours Holy water and exhales *mapacho* smoke over the crown of his head, spits *agua de florida* in his face, as well as sucking on certain parts of his body; the forehead, the neck or the stomach. Sucking is one of the primary ways in mestizo shamanism to draw out sickness from the body, and it can be done both by sucking physically and by doing it from a distance (Beyer 2009: 103). These different methods then are used for exorcising the demons while at the same time alleviating pain and nausea, and there are many more for use. One informant explained that for him the healing performance, including when curanderos blow tobacco over him, is like the establishing of a bridge of energy between curandero and the one being attended, and also acts as protection against the demons, confusing them.

The methods obviously range from more strictly shamanistic ones to others from within a Catholic framework, also when it comes to the physical tools used. One patient told me that

once while getting the demons out of him, the curandero ‘crossed me over the head 200 times’, and another that he held a cross in front of him while doing it.

Another of my informants told me of one time when he was called forth. The curandero began singing *ikaros* while rhythmically moving the *sapacha* over his head, and then read a prayer over him: ‘Padre Santo, cure a [name], cure a su familia, cure a su casa’; ‘Holy Father, cure [name], cure his family, cure his home’ [translation by author]. When finished, the patient gave off a bass noise, like a bellow, coming all the way down from his stomach, making the demons go away for the time being. After having returned to his seat, he started throwing up from the very bottom, explaining this to me as ‘me throwing up all of my bad behaviours, and all those demons feeding on that behaviour and on me’. Afterwards he felt protected all the way through the ceremony, even though the demons were still present around him.

7.4. Recap of cultural variables patterning altered states of consciousness

Before continuing to informants’ experiences a summary of the cultural variables, the ‘contexts of belief and ritual’ (Bourguignon 1979: 234) that pattern altered states of consciousness, should be in place.

Firstly, it is generally agreed among staff and patients at Takiwasi that spirits and the spirits of Christian saints do exist, and that they are present both outside of and during the ayahuasca ceremony, and that they will surely appear in the most evident way during the latter. Some of these are malevolent and latent inside the individual and some are benevolent, outside of the individual. By most, if not all of the staff and informants, the malevolent spirits are given the name of ‘demon’, and in some instances the benevolent ones the name of ‘angel’, clearly showing the Christian element and context of belief that run parallel to and simultaneously with representations of Amazonian cosmology, exemplified by the spirit of Mother Ayahuasca and the spirits of other plants and animals. Secondly, it is beforehand known that demonic struggle may ensue during ceremonies, and that these struggles are in part a struggle with oneself, since the addiction is given a living dimension – the demons being alive in and living off the individual – and that these are appropriate and essential to go through, with some mechanisms of defence known beforehand, while some are more strictly individual and idiosyncratic. Thirdly, the Catholic element is strikingly present, both on the physical premises in images, altars, drawings, buildings, events etc., as in informants’ objects (rosaries, amulets), in the objects of curanderos and priest during ceremony (crosses, holy water etc.) and as just mentioned above, in Christian prayers, giving a framework from which

to interpret experiences and take action during ceremonies. Fourthly, since one implicit goal of the whole treatment is to find God or a greater connection, this search will also be implicit during ceremony. It could be argued though, that whatever the 'frame of mind' of the participant of an ayahuasca ceremony, that person will feel connection to something, inevitably, and the crucial question then is rather how this connection is experienced – as to what - and interpreted.

As briefly discussed in the chapter on my informants, about half viewed themselves as agnostics and the other half as religious, with the majority having grown up in Catholic environments. Whether they strongly believed or not, the experiences, actions and interpretations of their ceremonial altered states of consciousness will to some degree be patterned beforehand due to this background.

8. Demonic agency, defence, possession and history

The following chapter will deal with several aspects of demonic presence. The first part centres on the agency of demons during ayahuasca ceremonies, their characteristics and ways of doing things as described by my informants. The second part concerns itself with the way informants defend themselves and deal with demons during ceremonies, and the third takes a look on the demon history of one of the possessed informants. The fourth and last part discusses the actual effects and consequences of these demonic struggles in the larger scheme of things.

8.1. Demon characteristics and behaviours

Many anthropologists (eg. Dolmatoff 1975, Luna 1986, Ripinsky-Naxon 1993) have investigated the different types of spirits inhabiting the world of Amazonian peoples, as well as those appearing during the intoxication of ayahuasca. They generally belong to different domains, and have different characteristics, powers and abilities, oftentimes shifting in their relationships to humans. Beyer (2009: 111) sums up what anthropologists up to this point have come to know about spirits within the context of ayahuasca: They lack the sensory coherence of real things, that is, they cannot be touched as we can touch physical objects, but they can be heard and felt, and sometimes seen; spirits are not public, meaning that another person in the same place does not see the same spirits as I would (though this could be disputed and will be elaborated on later); spirits behave in unusual ways, suddenly appearing and disappearing and doing so in unpredictable ways, while also being able to transform themselves; the appearance of spirits may differ to a high degree from that of regular persons, and may differ in appearance from meeting to meeting.

One major difference between this characterization of spirits and the characterization in this thesis of malevolent spirits, here called demons in keeping with terminology of informants, is that the latter almost always during the ayahuasca ceremony are observable and perceived. Another important thing to point out is that in the data gathered from informants there is no distinction between different kinds of malevolent spirits, they are all just called demons and seem to belong to the same category all together. The last thing that should be emphasized is that in the literature on ayahuasca, whether it deals with indigenous or mestizo populations, there is barely anything written on struggles with malevolent spirits, even less so from the perspective of ‘non-experts’. When written about, it commonly centres on struggles between different shamans or sorcerers.

However, at Takiwasi ceremonies demons are, fastidiously for the patients, present in different ways. Let us begin by drawing an initial picture of their 'physical' appearance as perceived by the informants. When moving around rapidly in the ceremonial space they do so as small clouds of black gas, basically like black ghosts as generally imagined, without any definite outer borders, their forms fluctuating, in an intermittent trajectory. When moving around like this they lack attributes such as eyes and a mouth. Though this being their general appearance when not in 'direct' contact with informants, according to the latter they may attain any form or shape, or even sounds, and be present although not visible. They normally take these other shapes when they enter into 'direct contact', or rather attack, patients.

In instances of hovering close to a patient for example, or prior to attacking, they often turn into some of these shapes and then often with contorted and terrifying faces and needle-sharp teeth. One informant told me how he during one ceremony started seeing the geometrical shapes which are common features of the early phases of ayahuasca intoxication. These geometrical formations like intricate pieces of artwork in fluorescent colours of black, red and orange suddenly 'took human form and transformed into an androgyn woman with a dangerous-looking face. It was really the teeth that looked dangerous, like alien teeth, and this face came moving fast like a ghost against me, going through me, and then for maybe five minutes different demons all with different faces came charging at me in the same way'. Another informant told me about a ceremony in the mountains, thus in a more natural setting, with trees surrounding the ceremonial space. During this ceremony he did not see any demons in the way described above, but rather the demons had taken over the bodies of the trees, the crowns having become terrifying faces, though they were too far away to actually feel menacing to him.

Often, informants talked about the 'shadow side', that is their own shadow or the dark side of their persons in which demons dwell. This was sometimes talked about conceptually, but most often quite literally: 'I saw this shadow in front of me, with a twisted face, it's a demon, and it's also all of your negative feelings.' Shadows then were often seen as the demon when 'inactive', and as a sign of impending attack, in case the patient could not control his negative feelings and maintain his calm. I will return to this later.

When demons do not start out as a shadow or by moving around 'out there' in the ceremonial space, they appear suddenly and from nowhere. Often many of them appear at the same time and charge viciously with force against their victim, or they start circling around him trying to get him to panic and succumb to the physical, emotional and psychological stress and pain that they generate in him. One informant told me how they once came from

behind and from above, trying to strangle him, and that at another time they came accompanied by his aunt, who he concluded had ‘always had something evil in her, a bad energy’, thus appearing in connection to something familiar to the patient. Another way of appearing, which is described as extremely painful by the informants to whom it happened, is from within the body. This is one such account:

“Push!” two demons burst out of my chest and started hovering on both sides of my face. “I can’t make it, I can’t make it, it’s too much!” I got cold, then hot, then I couldn’t feel my body, my legs, my arms, I couldn’t move. Then [the curandero] came to me and said “Tranquilo”, and offered me an amulet, but I didn’t want to put it on, I felt like it angered the demons. “I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die! Help me!” At this point there were a lot of demons all over the place, I felt black holes in my chest, the demons went straight through my body, screaming.’

At last, with help from the curanderos, he pacified the demons for the time being.

The demons may disappear as suddenly as they appear, though sometimes that disappearance is simply hiding before reappearing: ‘I didn’t feel the nausea [the effect] for two hours. Then all of a sudden a lot of demons showed up, circling around me, scaring me. After a while they left, but I saw that they entered the bodies of my friends, hiding in them. I left it there, didn’t think more of it, but then they appeared again.’ These kinds of experiences lead me to Beyer’s characterization of spirits as none-public: that different individuals in the same place do not see the same spirits (ibid). Though it would probably count solely as anecdotal evidence, several of my informants do account for having seen the demons of others, ranging from the informant who did not believe that the demons he saw were his own but rather the demons of others, to those having seen, during the course of the same ceremony, a demon being extracted by the curandero from one of the patients:

‘I saw a shadow behind [the patient] before it went into him to hide. Then later [the curandero] pulled it out, a white demon, and at the same time as it came out [the patient] gave off a scream.’;

‘I have seen some of the others’ demons during curaciones [exorcisms]. Once [the curandero] dragged out a white demon from the back of [the patient].’

So far throughout this characterization of demons, parts of their behaviour have hopefully become clear. However, their ways are manifold and their behaviour takes multiple forms

beyond mentioned forms of ‘physical’ attacks. They are not always seen, and when they are not, they may take shape as sounds with the aim of getting the patient to become confused or scared, or panic: ‘I heard demons but they didn’t make any sense. They made high-pitched heartrending and bass-like horrible noises in my ears.’ Another informant explained how the demons work: ‘They try to confuse, they try to frighten, they mock you, they manipulate the ikaros. They stream into your weaknesses, and feed on them. They know everything about you.’ Yet another one described how the demons can enter and direct your train of thought through their knowledge about you:

I first felt the presence of the demons from the outside, as if they wanted to hurt me, but I didn’t see them, I was very scared. That whole ceremony I couldn’t do any work, I had no idea how to defend myself against the evil around me. I panicked and pulled my hair while high-pitched terrible noises pierced my ears and it felt like demons entered my head, chattering uncontrollably in me. It was like they put a destructive thought on top of another destructive thought without allowing any space, no space at all, to really think or be calm. I felt like I had gone insane, completely, and that ceremony I screamed a lot, and at times all of the words that I was thinking I said out loud, completely possessed.

Throughout the interviews those patients who were always or nearly always in situations where demons were present told me that the demons feed on the fears and weaknesses of the patient, and thus the only way to get rid of them is by not succumbing to that fear and weakness and to stay strong and focused. To this end informants used different means, which will be discussed in the part that follows.

8.2. Defences against and orientations towards demons

For the patients who enter into demonic battles it is self-evident that demons are not with, but against them. Thus, the urge to defend oneself comes as naturally as if someone tried to kill you. Although, during mentioned demon attacks the patients are most often aware (with few exceptions) that they cannot be physically killed, that the attacks are directed towards the emotional, psychological and spiritual levels of their persons. Outside of the ayahuasca context, when they are not in these chaotic battles, they know perfectly well that they cannot be physically killed. There they also have time to orient themselves towards those demons, to interpret them and their attacks and what they represent or manifest, in order to better defend themselves when they once again enter into the ayahuasca domain. The orientation of the patients towards demons is thus refined over time, starting with the first encounter with them

in an ayahuasca ceremony (if not perceived of before) and then interpretation of those events outside of it, and back and forth in this way. Hallowell, talking about object (read spirit/demon/God) orientation in the behavioral environment, posits that

Object orientation likewise provides the ground for an intelligible interpretation of events in the behavioral environment on the basis of traditional assumptions regarding the nature and attributes of the objects involved, and implicit or explicit dogma regarding the “causes” of events. A cosmic and metaphysical orientation of the self supplies a conceptual framework for action in an orderly rather than a chaotic universe. It is not necessary, of course, that the individual be aware of the underlying metaphysical principles involved [...] (Hallowell 1988: 91)

The ‘nature and attributes of the objects involved’ - (of demons) - have been discussed in the chapter prior to this one. The ‘implicit or explicit dogma regarding the “causes” of events’, in this case the dogma of partial soul-loss, or lack or loss of spiritual space or spirituality, due to the intermingling of demons possessing the body, drug addiction and individual weaknesses, is regarded as causing these events/battles. Evidently then, spiritual connection through distinct means, or faith, as a form of ‘cosmic and metaphysical orientation’, as well as individual strength, may keep demons at bay during encounters, and over time make them become marginalized.

As Bourguignon points out, there may both be positive and negative evaluations of possession (1979: 247). Generally, a positive evaluation would concern power, for example the case of being possessed by a powerful being granting power in some way, and a negative one would concern possession by a being with concomitant negative consequences for the individual, such as demons. At Takiwasi, though demon possession in itself is not evaluated positively (lack of spirituality), it is by all means partly evaluated in positive terms because it brings to the fore the possibility of literally fighting it, and fighting it means exploring the different options relating to individual and psychological strength as well as connections to things more powerful than oneself, within the context of that battle.

Demon encounters are highly chaotic, and so patients under pressure must find a way to actively create or maintain some sort of order, always of course with the indirect or direct help from the curanderos, often by invoking the help of spirits, or God. Help may also arrive without being asked for by the patient, discussed in the next part. I will here exemplify with some defences and means of accomplishing this defence as told by informants.

8.2.1. Defending oneself with religious objects and through prayers

The majority of the patients at Takiwasi wear a rosary around their neck, and many have amulets of the Virgin Mary, Jesus or Saint Benedict. When being attacked by demons, or in general when things start to get a bit out of hand, the patient may invoke the power of a higher power through prayers coupled with intense concentration on the religious item in question. One informant described how he in the beginning of one ceremony, after having ingested the first cup of ayahuasca and started to notice the presence of demons around him, felt a doubt about the existence of God, that maybe he would go through the ceremony all alone, but said to himself ‘don’t doubt, don’t doubt!’ and started crossing himself while repeating ‘The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit’, which made the demonic presence diminish. Later that same ceremony it said

Boom! and the demons came out of nowhere, starting to circle around me, I was scared shitless, but started to cross me again, a thousand times [showing frenetic crossing] saying “the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” [just as frenetically]. “They cannot get to me, they cannot get to me!” I concentrated all of my energy on my amulet of Jesus and with that I could feel that God was with me all the time, not as in a vision, but as saying “I’m accompanying you, confront the evil!”

‘Drenched in sweat’, he finally succeeded to fight them off.

The same defence, prayers and/or use of the amulet, is used by many: ‘I see it [the demon] right in front of me when it appears, and then you pray, you cry, call the Virgin and the demon will disappear. It’s about praying to God, begging him to help. You hold your rosary to fend them off.’ One informant, the one mentioned earlier who did not dare to take the amulet offered to him for fear of making the demons angrier did finally do so in one ceremony, in which the curanderos themselves used certain items apart from the traditional shamanistic ones, to help him fight the demons:

In my third ceremony, after they’d gotten the demons out, I could feel my face change, I felt calmer, but was still scared. When I went back to my spot, when I sat down, I could see these holes all around me out of which the demons came, dark shadows, dragging me down until I was lying down. [The curandero] came and pulled me up and offered me the amulet and I took it. I was shaking, I couldn’t speak, I was in shock. [The curandero] held out the cross in front of me, and my heart left my body, attaching itself to the cross. As I was given

holy water, the doors were opened by the demons, “They will kill me! Help me!” I held the amulet with all my force and the shadows went away.”

Another time the same patient was exorcised by the priest during a ceremony. The priest held a cross in front of him while rhythmically moving the shacapa over his head, and after some time the patient felt the demon move up from his stomach and out.

Others emphasize the importance and force of prayers over religious objects or other ways of getting rid of demons:

The curaciones [healings] help me a lot. But praying is what helps me the most. When I pray, for example “Our Father”, I feel safer, and the demons are kept at a distance;

The best way to protect oneself is through believing, through prayers. I never have to use the amulet during the ayahuasca ceremonies. I protect myself with the prayers, with trust in God. This creates a barrier between me and the demons, they are kept at a distance, they do the things that they usually do, but they cannot do me any harm. The more faith you have, the stronger this barrier becomes;

God, as the totality of all, makes it possible for prayers to have actual effects. If you pray for your mother’s help for example, it will be channelled through Him and reach you at that same instance.

Thus informants have come to know through experience that prayers do have actual effects as protection against demons, even though they do not necessarily know ‘the underlying metaphysical principles involved’ in the protection arriving and coming to be as it is. They do not only orient themselves towards demons, deciding on the appropriate and most efficient mode of action against them, but also orient themselves towards prayers and objects relating to God or saints, in this way facilitating the connection with the divine with the result of obtaining actual positive effects through different forms of protection during the ayahuasca ceremony. A connection to the divine or to a spiritual dimension is also part of the motivational orientation, a way of satisfying the spiritual needs of the self which within the framework of the Takiwasi regime is crucial for any kind of personal recovery, psychological well-being and a good life.

8.3. A short demon biography

Bourguignon distinguishes between two different forms of possession: possession trance and nontrance possession. The type of possession discussed above, which takes place during ayahuasca ceremonies, fits into the category of possession trance. Altered states of consciousness and possession trance go hand in hand, and it is during possession trance that possession states clearly manifest themselves, unmistakably for the individuals in this study. According to Boddy, spirits (and so also demons) may be part of a more extended and stable relationship with the possessed individual in which case it would fall into the category of nontrance possession. Which ever of these two categories applied, possession stands for an 'integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable' (1994: 407). Below is one such account told by one informant, concerning what is here called nontrance possession.

Already in his early childhood the informant was infected and possessed by a demon, and since he was never baptized, nor went through with the confirmation, he never did have a chance to rid himself of this demon. Both he himself and his family knew that there was something very dark inside of him. A couple of years after having become possessed, while he was still very young, he got seriously sick and almost died. During the sickness everything about him changed, his behaviour ('I became a monster') and even his physical appearance. He robbed someone for the first time when he was six or seven years old, he used drugs for the first time when he was ten and after that had used most of them, also turning into an alcoholic. With time he came to realize that 'the demons feed on all this, alcohol, drugs, porn, manipulation, bad conduct, and gets stronger'. When closing in on his twenties, at one moment he heard God's voice in his head saying: 'I am here if you allow me.' He had always thought that some time the darkness inside of him would have to come out and that he would have to confront that darkness. That was when he decided to contact Takiwasi in order not only to confront that darkness but also to learn about the light in him and hopefully get clean and grow.

During his time at Takiwasi he learned by seeing, through ayahuasca visions, that this demon was not strictly his own individual one but a trans-generational one. Witchcraft, for example, had been part of the family lineage down through the ages, which had made the demonic presence even stronger in the demon. And witchcraft was not the only problem of prior generations. He had 'absorbed', through this trans-generational demon, the weight of rape, incest, violence and evil, all the dreadful things that had been going on over the years and which the demon had been feeding on making itself stronger. Explaining why demons are

such powerful forces, he said that ‘They have so many years of history that they are really smart, they know everything about you, and the ones before you’. In the end this informant was not only to confront *a* demon dwelling inside him, but a demon which had been growing and learning over a period of many lifetimes, including issues of all sorts stemming from countless other individuals.

9. Benevolent agency

This chapter will, in contrast to the one above, deal with agency and presence of benevolent agents during the ayahuasca ceremony, as well as the religious or spiritual experiences that are inherent in some of them. The first part will deal with nothing less than experiences pertaining to God, that is, experiences of his presence as perceived *in situ*. The second part takes a look at Christian personages and spirit/angelic presence. The third will move into the domain of animal spirits, or power animals.

9.1. God

So I was floating around in space, like you do quite often when you've taken ayahuasca, but this time was different, I was floating among the whitest of clouds I've ever seen. Then suddenly, completely without warning, God came to me, but he was hidden by the clouds, I didn't see him, I was still just floating around there, but it was completely clear that it was him, I couldn't mistake that presence. He communicated with me without words, and before I knew it, I'd come to possess all of his power, as if he lent it to me. I got to feel what it was like to be God, with all that power, it was enough to explode. It's difficult to put into words, I still don't really understand that it happened and how. Then, before I knew it, I shrank down and became the tiniest of particles, and got to feel what that was like. All that power went off somewhere and I was left with the power of that most tiny thing, which is still power even if it's less, and it became so obvious that his power is in everything.

This is one account told to me by an informant, and also one of the most extraordinary. The description of what happened to this one informant leads one into the domain of the ineffable, into the power of a God in the hands (or at least in some form of experiential possession) of a human being, too great to completely grasp or explain. It also shows a God who grants power, or rather grants insight into his power and existence, how he dwells in and makes up all living things that exist. There are a few examples of a similar kind of experience as the one described above, and some less (but still) extraordinary ones relating to his strongly felt presence. The type of experiences most common is that in which God is 'talking', with or without words, to the patient.

For example, the informant who gave the above account of his encounter with God told me that he in his first ayahuasca ceremony was welcomed by God and that during his time at the centre his faith in him had grown. The actual onset of this growth came a few months after the initial encounter when he during a ceremony was told by God that 'Religion is not a way to

salvation, it is your responsibility'. In general though, when informants talk of the things God has told them, these often pertain to their struggling and keeping strong during the ayahuasca ceremony. One informant, during a ceremony, begged God to grant him power, security and motivation. God answered that 'you have to confront your fears, face to face'. Another informant was told 'Stand up, defend yourself!' Many informants describe God's presence and aid as a filling up of energy: 'I have never seen Him, but I've felt it like a feeling of an energy of spirit entering me, filling me up with his energy, and then He leaves.' Most often informants explained it as an energy filling them up from *above*. They also accounted for the importance of being open to him, that if you shut yourself he will not be able to enter. Thus God is granted an agency, but an agency that at times is contingent on the openness of the individual. He is accompanying the latter in difficult times sometimes through speech, sometimes by mere presence, and sometimes through granting them his power or energy.

Another informant had the following experience, accounted for below. He described it as his strongest, as an overwhelming metamorphosis, directed by God. Even though it was not a distinct encounter with God as such, its end follows the same pattern as the ones above:

It was both very physical and spiritual. Everything was energy, everything around me, my own body was pure energy. When the curandero approached me everything above his knees was energy. I couldn't hear the ikaros as sounds or words but felt them as energy from above the groin to the throat and it felt supergood. It had a floating feel and character to it, and I could feel it all, the interconnectedness of all. And everything was light and colourful. I could not orient myself in the room at all. When the curandero blew perfume over me it was like a waterfall of energy and colours. And when he later fanned me with the chakapa I felt like a leaf myself, a leaf in autumn, turning into powder, disintegrating, and then I was rebuilt again as a whole leaf. This was the feeling all through the ceremony. That I was being fragmented, shattered into pieces, and then rebuilt, with the feeling of rebirth. When I had been healed by the curandero at the altar and was about to walk back I couldn't, I had no idea where I was at that point. I saw the world in different complex forms, saw everything in its complexity, it's impossible to explain. I looked at the million colours that were surrounding me, then I focused one point, one of those millions colours and found a million more. All the way through the ceremony I felt the power of God, or rather it all was the power of God, filling me up from above. It was so strong and intense that I felt I had lost control, but God, through words in my head and with the luminosity around me, said that "you are never alone".

Occasionally, God is felt as a possessing agent, not only granting part of his power and support but actually in part taking over the individual in question. Usually his presence is

evaluated in positive terms, quite naturally, but sometimes his possessing qualities are evaluated in terms a bit more ambivalent:

[...] But this time he was inside of me. Other times he was always on the outside, and this time was crazy because it felt like he took away parts of my identity so that I was going to disappear. But he told me that he will always be outside of me and that this was for sure and that I could do nothing about it. Having God inside of you like that did feel great in one way, but having Him inside doing things with your identity like that also somehow felt like a violation of my person.

It may be argued, in the light of the above material, that God's words are actually the words of the informants themselves. Though phenomenologically, all informants do posit that the words come from without themselves, and that they often come accompanied by a divine presence, granting them force and strength in order to be able to bear whatever hardship they are facing. James argues that 'truth *happens* to an idea [read entity/God]. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *veri-fication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*' (2000: 88). Thus the existential status of this perceived God, about which/whom any theoretical or empirical closure is impossible to reach by all means, is made less important than the actual event in which he *becomes* God. However, these experiences must, as discussed earlier, also be put in its proper context with the certain cultural patterning that goes with it, which to a high degree is Christian/Catholic, as well as the consequent interpretation of it which follows the same framework. That is, if you harbour an idea of a Christian God, he may well appear, and if you shut yourself from the same idea or the same God, he may not. And if Christianity/Catholicism is the interpretative framework from which to interpret experiences pertaining to the ineffable, to feelings of indescribable awe and a perceived external power, it may well provide the primary explanatory model from which to do so at that certain moment in time in that particular context, in this case that of Takiwasi.

None of my informants who encountered God in one way or another had any doubts about whether it was actually him or something else playing that role. Rather, they were completely sure and aware of his existence, even though they could not explain the metaphysical principles of it, or his agency for that matter, which inevitably was viewed as one able to express itself in manifold ways, sometimes concretely, sometimes vaguely, but always as real. Due to the belief in God, and held ideas about his nature through 'implicit or explicit dogmas' (Hallowell 1988: 91), 'words in their heads' are interpreted as coming from God, as he is

always interpreted as a benevolent and helping force, a force that is great enough to come to the rescue of a particular individual in difficult times.

9.2. Christian personages, and angelic and spirit presence

The *ikaros*, prayers and invocations employed in order to invoke spiritual allies during ceremonies, as mentioned earlier, seek not only different spirits part of Amazonian cosmology but also of the Christian one. When spirits do appear during ceremonies at Takiwasi, according to informants, these do often appear in the form of Christian personages or angels. Spirits, as a quite general term for the multitude of entities encountered during the ayahuasca-induced state, are sometimes clearly distinguishable, sometimes not: 'The spirits were also there, but they don't always show, they don't need to show themselves like the demons.' Often they appear only as bright or fluorescent lights flying around or as sounds, or music, and they provide a feeling of security and alliance: 'When they are present you know that you've got a powerful force helping you through the things that will come. When they arrive they drive away the bad ones.' You may call them for help, something that the curanderos already do all through the ceremony, but *they* always choose if they will come, 'you can't go to them'.

Christian personages are very powerful spirits. Their mere presence clears up the space of or drives away demons, and grants to the patients power to stay strong and focused: 'One time [during ceremony] up at the chakra [mountains] Jesus was sitting on the branch of a tree the whole ceremony, just sitting there as protection, so I felt that there wasn't really any reason for worry.' Mary often shows up with her baby in her arms, watching over the person seeing her. Sometimes she arrives with someone else, as when 'Mary and St. Michael were standing on each side of me, almost touching me, bringing me peace and tranquillity'. These saints' actions and patients' accounts of these kinds of visions are often of slowness but promptness; concentrated power and much force, though always gentle, in barely any movement.

However, there are also those times when actions are of a more immediate and explicit nature. Some of these have some similarities to the experiences mentioned above of God filling up the individual with power/energy, occasionally from above. One informant told of how 'Mary came before me and struck me with a sword from the top of my head all the way through my body, and how this 'was a wonderful feeling of divine strength and love'. Another one gave the following account:

I took the first cup, but after that I just felt tired, I was blocked, not ready to see what I wanted. Some time after taking the second one it said “bam!”, there was an explosion of light, I saw everything as through a kaleidoscope, then two bodies in front of me, but I could only make out who one of them was, it was Jesus. They were both made of colours and fragmented, but at the same time of the purest white, connected to each other. In that same moment I felt this wave of emotions coming over me, like actual water cleansing me.

Here the informant felt Jesus, and another yet unknown person/spirit, cleansing him. This cleansing does not seem to have been exclusively a spiritual one, but rather also an unblocking on the psychological and emotional levels, those levels that according to the Takiwasi regime are the levels which have to be dealt with and opened up before being able to reach spiritual or divine connection. Thus in a sense Jesus did in this vision aid both the patient and the curanderos in what they want to accomplish during the course of the treatment and during the course of the ceremony.

One of the strongest and most vivid moments of another informant, during which he told me that he also felt that spirituality and religious belief is not just superstition but most real, is that of an encounter with an angel:

I closed my eyes and looked up at the blue sky and suddenly a window appeared up there and it was opened up by a strong push from the other side and in it appeared a beautiful angel that began pouring a blue kind of powder from his mouth down over me like an eternal sacrament and then flew off.

‘This’, he said, ‘made spirituality make sense, this made me believe.’

Another informant was helped by a spirit, while in the proximity of demons:

It was a king-like figure, flying in the sky. There were shadows all round me, in which the demons were hiding, and the spirit flew over them following them as they were moving and without touching them they became smaller and smaller, as if he was eating them from up there.

Most of these appearances by spirits or saints seem to come without the individual calling them, as if they themselves know when that help is needed. This confirms Beyers characterization of spirits ‘as suddenly appearing and disappearing and doing so in unpredictable ways (Beyer 2009: 111)’, even though the curanderos’ invocations and calls to saints and spirits, as well as patients prayers pertaining to them, may provide a way through

which their appearance become possible and accomplished. Inevitably, this assumption must at this point and in this thesis stand only as preliminary.

To conclude, many encounters with spirits or Christian saints are experienced during ayahuasca ceremonies, and they become a strong force of alliance using different modes of action, both in forms of protection and as forms of emotional and spiritual uplifting. Due to the proximity to the Catholic belief-system at Takiwasi (on the physical premises and in different activities), the often Catholic upbringing or at least environment of the patients prior to treatment and the service before ayahuasca ceremonies, these experiences of altered states of consciousness are to some degree patterned beforehand, bringing with them expectations of what to come, in that way allowing for it to come. Due to the Christian items used during ceremonies, as well as the invocations to God and Christian saints by the curanderos - and through prayers by the patients - this patterning and these expectations are then again reinforced *in situ*. However, all encounters are strongly felt as essentially real, sometimes even more so than anything else that has been experienced in life, thus providing a vibrating as well as stable ground for growth of informants' spirituality, belief and faith, also when the ceremony is over and life continues outside of it.

9.3. Animal spirits

Encounters with animal spirits are quite rare, usually only happening once or twice for a patient during the time of treatment, if at all. Transformations into animals, are also rather uncommon. Visions of animals on the other hand, when viewed not as spirits but as actual animals, are commonplace during ayahuasca ceremonies. In general, animal spirit encounters provide space for reflection about personal traits and characteristics, as well as feelings of protection, alliance and safety; of being 'at home'. This is why they are also called 'power animals' (Winkelman 1996). Transformations often carry with them insights into the lives of animals.

The individual's motivational orientation, that is, the 'orientation of the self towards the objects of its behavioural environment with reference to the satisfaction of its needs (Hallowell 1988: 100)' is a notion useful here from which to view the following experiences, as well as the concomitant suggestion that 'The satisfaction of needs requires some kind of activity (ibid)'.

The power animal or animal spirit is often perceived as being *of* the individual or patient, that is, it mirrors his characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, clearly emphasized through the animal characteristics in question. This is one account of such an encounter:

I was transported away from the maloca, all the patients, all the curanderos disappeared, and I arrived in a turquoise rectangular box, and I heard sounds like in Matrix [imitates computerized sounds] while shifting dimension and then in front of me was a giant chameleon, my power animal. It didn't use words, but I heard it in my head as "This is my home. Welcome."

This informant characterized himself, even before telling me about this experience, as a social chameleon: 'I can hang out with both the rich and the poor, the old and the young, I usually fit in wherever I go. Here at the centre I get along with all of the patients.' As positive as he felt this to be in one sense, he was also aware of the problematics of this characteristic, in part manifested as social anxiety, expressing itself in wanting to please and accommodate everyone: 'In one ceremony my intention [question or desire to be answered] was "How can I be in peace with myself?" and the answer he got was "Don't let yourself be influenced by what others do, don't let yourself be affected by them."' He had from that point started working on that problem, and explained that if some of the patients tried to get his attention during ceremonies, he tried his hardest not to take any notice of them in order to stay focused on his own work.

Another vision of an animal spirit came in a different guise:

In one vision I saw myself as an Eskimo, wearing the fur of a polar bear, my spirit animal. It's strong, it's not threatened by any predators, it's a good mother who takes good care of her young. But it's also lazy, just lay around big parts of the day. These characteristics fit very well with my personality.

This informant was a quite steadfast person, often in discussions standing and falling with his opinions, answering perceived unwarranted critique with irony or a sharp comeback, and was thought of by the other patients as the intellectual of the group. Thus the attributes of strength and the sense of not being threatened were psychological and mental in nature, rather than physical. According to him the lack of the latter was due to his somewhat lazy nature. For this reason he had now started to do more physical work at the centre, chopping wood every day

as a way of getting his body and mind in better condition, creating a routine, even though he did not embrace it wholeheartedly.

In the same vein as the told account of the chameleon above, an informant (the one possessed from an early age) found himself in a ceremony with his spirit animal next to him, with the one difference that at the time of this animal spirit's appearance demons were in his vicinity:

I was half-lying on my mattress and I was surrounded by demons when the tiger appeared right beside me, he was calm, just watching, but there to help. It said without words, "I'm here to accompany you, but you have to do the work". It became much easier to keep calm there with the demons with that kind of company. Like having a good friend by your side when you're going through something difficult, who knows you and always understands you.

The tiger, this informant told me, is characterized by strength, purity and solitude. Quite strikingly, this informant was the 'loner' of the group, often being by himself, but well-liked and respected by the others. When occasionally speaking while in the gathered group, he did so slowly and condensed, calm and with an air of experience. Some patients told me that he was 'the biggest demon', going through the worst ordeals during ceremony, though at the time of my departure having come a long way in his personal recovery and growth.

In the three accounts above the needs of these patients become apparent, through the perceived characteristics of the animals (objects) in relation to the characteristics of the individuals, as well as the most fruitful ways of satisfying those needs. Through these accounts then, it is argued that relations with other-than-human selves may be as important for the individual, or more so, concerning certain aspects of his life, than relations with other human beings, for improving and learning about himself, as well as adjusting himself psychologically.

Some informants told me of having transformed into animals, completely or partly. One turned into a dog in a natural paradise, 'taking over their abilities', being able to 'smell the flowers' and feeling connected to all the other animals in that place, 'living like them'. Sometimes informants became only a part of something, like one who turned into 'the leg of a panther, you have some of its powers and strength but not all'. Most of the informants having experienced these types of transformations told me that they had arrived at the conclusion that all animals had a consciousness very much their own, and that they were possessors of a soul

as much as humans, only in a different physical form. One of Shanon's informants reported similar animal transformation, though into a cheetah:

I felt myself being transformed into a cheetah. I was still me but at the same time a cheetah. I moved and ran energetically and with great agility, just like a big cat. It all felt very real and I enjoyed it tremendously. At one point, in front of me, I saw a deer. It was there for me to hunt. However, even as a feline, I felt I had to ask the deer for forgiveness. Eventually, I could not bring myself to kill it. (Shanon 2010: 213)

Within the context of Amazonian shamanism, animal transformations are of high importance, and the animals into which one seeks to become transformed are normally jaguars or birds, for power or for the ability of flight (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). But transformations into animals do not happen only to indigenous peoples, as shown above. For instance Luna, during his own participation in an ayahuasca ceremony, found himself transformed into a serpent (Luna & Amaringo 1993:11), much like some of my informants, though in the latter case into other animals.

10. Changes in religious and spiritual worldviews

Through all interviews conducted and through all informal conversations with patients during the period of my fieldwork it became clear that whatever religious or spiritual views they had held before their time in treatment had eventually changed, sometimes drastically, during the course of it. This fact may not seem that extraordinary when viewed against the backdrop of the centre and the ceremonies held there, in which patients have encounters with what is perceived as God, demons, saints, angels, spirits, apart from many more extraordinary experiences pertaining to the transcendent, left out in this thesis. Though many of the patients held religious views before arriving at the centre, some of them did not and called themselves atheists. One of those told me that when he arrived at the centre he did not want anything to do with Christianity or the Church, but after four months he got baptized: 'I didn't want to when I was standing there at the altar, I was scared, my body ached and I felt sick, my eyes were wide open and I was sweating, and I couldn't talk. When the priest put the water on my head I calmed down and the fear disappeared.' Two more of the patients who lived at the centre during my time there had gotten baptized. Both of them - French citizens - had made the choice of Catholicism in part because of the practicality of it: 'I was told that it's always a good thing to practice the religion of your home country because you know the language, you know the context. If you try to become a Buddhist, one single word read wrong can change the whole meaning and definition of that path, especially when you're not familiar with the holy scriptures of that religion.'

Another patient also having called himself atheist was still critical of religion: 'The church is shit, and I can't see the connection to spiritual growth in organized religion, so I follow my own'. After seven months he now believed in reincarnation and that 'life on earth is for personal and spiritual evolution'.

A majority of the patients who had not before believed in such entities had now come to believe in the existence of spirits and/or angels, and those who did not explained that they at least had gained a more open-minded attitude towards the possibility of their existence.

Not a single one doubted the existence of God as a benevolent and omnipotent force.

11. Conclusion

This thesis has explored a group of patients' experiences of going through a treatment in which the use of ayahuasca is one of the main pillars, allowing the drinker to enter a non-ordinary reality which opens up the possibility of having encounters with demons, spirits, angels, saints, animals and God. To this end I have presented ethnographic material in a way that I hope makes justice to my informants' experiences pertaining to that reality and the relations within it. It has also explored the agency of entities in part in and of themselves, and in part through the impacts and effects they have on their human counterparts, both inside and outside of the ayahuasca ceremony. Thus, through a widening of the notion of sociality and social relations it has been argued and shown that the latter may be constituted by humans as well as entities of different forms not usually thought of as constitutive of social relations.

Up to this point, not much anthropological research has been conducted on the relationship between demons or malevolent spirits and non-expert drinkers of ayahuasca whether within or without the ayahuasca ceremony. Hopefully then, the material presented in this thesis is contributing to new knowledge in that area. To my knowing, little has also been written on these here presented human-entity relations of non-indigenous peoples, thus hoping it has shed some light on some types of relations between people like you and me, and entities.

By looking at these relations through the concept of a behavioural environment inhabited by entities of different classes affecting actual behaviour, the agency and characteristics of entities has been delineated. The conditions under which these come to be as agents is connected to certain cultural variables of the centre: the religious-spiritual milieu on the physical premises in Catholic iconography and edifices, activities such as Christian prayer, mass and use of items during ceremony, and the amalgamation of the Amazonian spirit-world and the Catholic belief-system in Takiwasi philosophy. The latter allows for both spirits of different orders and Christian personages – Jesus, Mary, and other saints - to be at play and present simultaneously, in ceremony and outside of it. These variables do inevitably have a forceful impact on what to possibly expect from experiences during ayahuasca ceremonies, and these are thus partly patterned beforehand. At the same time, they also provide the consequent framework of interpretation, reinforcing those same expectations and yet again the interpretations.

Demons as agents are given a living dimension in and of the body as parasites and possessors, feeding on the lack of spirituality in individuals as well as on their destructive behaviours and deficiencies. Thus patients orient themselves towards demons as if they orient

themselves towards their own persons, struggling against their own flaws and weaknesses. To this end it has been shown that the effects demons have on these individuals create an urge or a need to connect to something beyond this world, to the divine or to benevolent agents of another order, in order to being able to fight their way through the hardships they are facing both during and outside of the ayahuasca ceremony. Thus faith has shown to be both essential and useful for the personal recovery and spiritual growth of my informants, and a practical consequence of these encounters.

Patients orient themselves towards benevolent agents as a need for spiritual connection, and as defence against dark powers. The appearance of God, saints, angels, and spirits are almost always dependent on these entities themselves, it being impossible for individuals to go to them. When these do arrive it often is to refill energy, to grant power and to accompany through struggles of different kinds. As mentioned, faith often brings the *presence* of those entities, as alliance against the forces deemed evil. Furthermore, these encounters and moments of presence do push the belief that they do exist and thus follow informants into everyday life. Thus, during the time of treatment the behavioral environment is actually transforming. This is emphasized by the renewed or reinforced religious or spiritual worldviews of informants.

Encounters with power animals or animal spirits allow for reflection about personal characteristics and have the practical consequence of directing informants in the way they can deal with deficiencies or perceived flaws in behaviour and personality. Other than this they provide security during ayahuasca ceremonies. Transformations into animals provide insights into the life forms of other than humans, their life predicament and consciousness.

I conclude by stating that the data showing that informants orient themselves in different ways towards demons, spirits, saints, and God, mark their belief in them as essentially existent, thus being constitutive of relationships – social relationships in a widened sense. They do have a crucial importance for the lives of informants and are felt as just as real – though different in form and substance – as any relationship.

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