

Earth, Gender and Ceremony: Gender Complementarity and Sacred Plants in Latin America

Tierra, Género y Ceremonia: Complementariedad de Género y Plantas Sagradas en Latinoamérica

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Abstract

Symbolism related to gender balance is pervasive throughout Latin American landscape. There are volcanoes with legends of separation of male and female longing for unification in Mexico as well as Nicaragua. Other landscape features such as the Islands of the Sun and Moon in Bolivia or temples such as *Huaca de la Luna* and *Huaca del Sol* dedicated to the sun and moon in the north of Peru, point to ideologies of gender complementarity in pre-colombian cultures. Iconography throughout Latin America combine symbols of male and female, heaven and earth, eagle and serpent. Although Latin American cultures seem to be dominated by machismo and marianismo, a closer examination of ancient and surviving indigenous religious traditions points to the earlier existence of gender balance. This article will discuss the concept of gender complementarity that pervades indigenous cultures and examine the recent global emergence of visionary plants as part of a movement aiming to re-discover the power of the earth and restore the ancient power of the feminine. Finally, evidence from the research of one of the authors will be presented showing that this lesson of gender balance might often be overlooked.

Keywords: ayahuasca, gender, landscape, Latin America, earth, indigenous, yagé, ceremonies, legends.

Resumen

El simbolismo relacionado con el equilibrio de género es un fenómeno generalizado en todo el paisaje latinoamericano. Hay volcanes con leyendas sobre la separación de lo masculino y lo femenino anhelando por su unificación en México, así como en Nicaragua. Otras características del paisaje como las Islas del Sol y de la Luna en Bolivia, o templos como los templos *Huaca de la Luna* y *Huaca del Sol* dedicados al sol y la luna en el norte de Perú, indican la posible existencia de ideologías de complementariedad de género en las culturas pre-colombinas. Iconografías a lo largo de toda América Latina combinan símbolos de hombre y mujer, el cielo y la tierra, el águila y la serpiente. Aunque las culturas de América Latina actualmente parecen estar dominada por el machismo y el marianismo, un examen más detenido de las tradiciones religiosas indígenas de la antigüedad y de las que sobreviven hoy en día indican la posible existencia de un equilibrio de género anterior. Este artículo discutirá el concepto de complementariedad de género que prevalece en las culturas indígenas y examina la reciente aparición global de las plantas visionarias como parte de un movimiento que tiene por objetivo el redescubrimiento del poder de la tierra y la restauración del antiguo poder de lo femenino. Por último, se presentan los resultados de la investigación realizada por uno de los autores, mostrando que esta lección de equilibrio de género a menudo suele ser pasada por alto.

Palabras clave: ayahuasca, género, paisaje, Latinoamérica, tierra, indígenas, yagé, ceremonias, leyendas.

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Introduction

This article suggests a correlation between the increased interest in sacred plants from Latin America among Westerners and its relation to attitudes toward gender equity. The authors propose that there are valuable lessons to be learned regarding gender balance and integration, both concepts being pervasive in ancient and contemporary indigenous cultures. The increasing interest in ayahuasca and other sacred plants may suggest a craving for the restoration of balance on many levels, including gender, as it often takes the form of a discourse about restoring the sacred feminine in contemporary life. Ethnographies such as the one about the Lahu in China (Du, 2002) as well as the Vanatinai of Papua New Guinea (Lepowski, 1993) point to the existence of gender egalitarianism in indigenous cultures cross-culturally. What these and other cases show is not the promise of a lost “matriarchy” but the possibility of true gender egalitarianism and complementarity, which could be a much more radical idea. What the existing examples show is that any society that harbors the ideal of gender egalitarianism has a worldview of gender unity that permeates mythology, ideology as well as practice; in the Lahu case this gender unity is exemplified in the proverb “Chopsticks only work in pairs” (Du, 2002, p. 1).

In Latin America there is plenty of evidence for such gender balance in the past (Boone, 1999; Klein, 1993; Mijares, 2015; Nuttall, 2010; Roza, 2008). Throughout the continent there are legends using gender to explain nature and natural forces. Ancient art and architectural designs depicting masculine and feminine genders are also systematically scattered throughout the landscape. Yet, some would argue that, despite these images, actual gender balance has not been evidenced for well over a thousand years in this continent, as women have not enjoyed the economic, political and religious power as well as freedom of expression as the masculine population. There has been far more yang than yin (Mijares, Rafea, Falik & Schipper, 2007).

The authors do recognize that gender appears in numerous ways, and take the transpersonal perspective (Jung, 1968; Wilber, 2001) that, regardless of sexual and gender preferences, an integration of masculine and feminine expressions are needed within the individual and within culture. This is a key attribute of transformation. Our current ecological predicament has no doubt propelled greater move-

ment toward transformation via a stronger connectivity with nature and ancient, indigenous ways.

The connection with nature seems to have been strong amongst ancient South Americans. The ancient *Aymara* peoples, and in particular the *Tiwanaku*, of Southern Peru, Western Bolivia and Northern Chile established powerful religious beliefs and were a major locus of cosmological activity around 400 CE (Kolata, 1993; McAndrews, Alabarracin-Jordan & Bermann, 1997). The various mythologies spoke of the creator God *Viracocha* (Young-Sanchez, 2009), rising out of Lake Titicaca, bringing forth the sun, moon and stars. His children were *Inti*, the sun god; *Mama Quilla*, the moon goddess governing fertility; and the earth goddess, *Pachamama*. According to later Inca mythology, Viracocha stood on the Island of the Moon as Mama Quilla was born and took her place in the sky. Likewise, Viracocha stood on the Island of the Sun as Inti came forth and gave light. Lake Titicaca itself was considered to be the *matrix* from which all life began.

Later as the Tiwanaku were taken over by the Incas in the 1400s and assimilated into the patriarchal Inca culture, sun worship became the dominant religion and males the dominant gender. The *Virgins of the Sun* (*Ñustas*), young chosen women raised in temples with vows of chastity, were keepers of the sacred fire, weavers of the sacred garments and preparers of ritual meals, yet were basically servants of the elite. They were chosen at young ages (8 or 10) for beauty and/or special talents—raised to be sacrificial victims, wives or concubines to privileged Incan males (Lavrin, 1978). This indicates that a dominant male social structure was in place long before the Spaniards arrived, as the Incas established their own brand of patriarchal social structure and religious influence (Mangudai, 2015).

In Central America, various Mayan creation myths also depicted the sun as masculine, but stories varied in depicting earth and moon as masculine or feminine. There were also numerous male and female deities. Later when the Aztec civilization took over the great city of Teotihuacan, art and artifact indicated that the Great Goddess reigned (Pasztory, 1977, 1993). Her images correspond with North American Hopi, Navajo and other tribal legends of *Spider Woman*—the great Goddess from which all life is born. Teotihuacan clearly depicted her place of honor in its iconography (Pasztory, 1977, 1993), along with its rising pyramids worshipping Sun (God) and Moon (Great Goddess). Archetypal references to gender balance are also suggested in the temples and pyramids of

the Sun and moon throughout these ancient sites, and, especially, in the later symbolic combination of eagle (sky) and serpent (earth). The Aztec Goddess, *Cihuacoatl*, was snake woman—healer, associated with midwives and birthing (Miller & Taube, 2003). The feathered-serpent God, *Quetzalcoatl*, combined symbols of sky (bird) and earth (snake). These symbolic representations associated with masculine and feminine archetypes can be found in ancient sites and artifacts in Yucatan (known as Kukulcan, Guatamala, and Honduras as well (Freidel, Schele, Parker & Kislak, 1993). In these lands the feathered serpent was also known as Kukulcan. His power was symbolized by the combination of these symbolic forces. Tragically as time had passed, it was the patriarchal male who integrated the symbols of the earthy feminine associated power. But the legends related to land remained faithful to the feminine. Legends of volcanoes in particular, point to a longing of restoration of gender balance. The volcanoes, *Popocatepetl* (male) and *Ixtaccihuatl* (female) about two hours from Mexico City tell the story of separated lovers. The warrior male stands alongside of the sleeping princess (hints of Cinderella and Snow White myths). Images of this legend are seen in untold numbers of Mexican restaurants, depicting the warrior holding the lovely, but dead, princess in his arms—images of the repressed feminine. This archetypal story manifests in yet another narrative depicting the Nicaraguan volcanoes, *Concepción* (male) and *Maderas* (female) on Isla Ometepe where Concepción stands alongside the Maderas to protect her. The Nahuatl influence is seen in the similarity of these lamentations. It is also pertinent to note that Popocatepetl and Concepción (deemed masculine) are active whereas Ixtaccihuatl and Maderas (deemed feminine) are dormant volcanoes. These stories mirror gender imbalance although they also depict the genders' longing for one another.

The great historian of religion Geoffrey Parrinder (1983) noted that ancient myths had addressed “the forcing apart of sky and earth” as all of life and that the cosmos and the natural world had previously been regarded as being “united in sexual union.” Latin American myths depicting separated lovers in these natural volcanic forms support his proclamation. They seem to reflect the loss of unity between Madre Tierra (Mother Earth) and Padre Cielo (Father Sky), Pacha Mama and Pacha Papa along with the separation of body and mind, female and male.

The ideal of gender balance or complementarity is evident in Latin American cosmologies and mythologies. A central concept in

Mesoamerican religions is that of Ometéotl (dual god) which was the god of duality and union between masculine and feminine. It was often represented as both male and female on Mixtec calendars predicting the cycles of nature (Gómez-Cano, 2010). A similar concept of gender complementarity in indigenous cultures comes from the Mapuche in Chile, whose culture's organizing principle is quadropartition. In this system masculine and feminine, old and young are complementary. Central to Mapuche cosmology is the deity Ngünechen, who is perceived as a sacred family consisting of: an old man and an old woman as well as a young man and a young woman. These four facets constitute Mapuche wholeness (Bacigalupo, 2007).

There are ceremonial temples and sites dedicated to the sun and moon and related masculine and feminine deities throughout these ancient lands and civilizations, yet it is difficult to find this ideology manifesting in contemporary people's lives. There is plenty of evidence of masculine dominance or strict roles for men and women prior to the Spanish invasion and the imposition of its patriarchal governance and related religious influence. It appears that the rise of these great civilizations in Mesoamerica occurred not long after the manifestation of patriarchal ideology and related cultural phenomena in other parts of the world (Mijares et al., 2007). Perhaps the biologist Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic resonance (Sheldrake, 1988, 2009) offers an explanation.

According to this theory, a *morphic field* establishes within and around repetitive acts, behaviors and even abstract thoughts (all considered as *morphic units*). Thus if within the morphic field, for example, the archetypal field of shared human consciousness, a new behavior or manifestation of an abstract idea is initiated, and if this new idea has enough power and repetition (constituting morphic units), it will resonate throughout the morphic field and create change. According to Sheldrake (1988), “the organizing fields of animal and human behavior, of social and cultural systems, and of mental activity can all be regarded as morphic fields, which contain an inherent memory” (p. 112). This would be similar to a universal database, whereupon new information, such as the rise of a patriarchal ideology (morphic units), resonated throughout the field – spreading ideas of gender imbalance and changing the previous gender-balanced paradigm. We have seen and experienced the results of this in the lack of care and connection to our natural world and the demeaning of the female. The following section is

an example of gender imbalance accompanying the increasing loss of connection to land and meaning.

Marianismo and Machismo

The term Machismo is often used to refer to traditional Latin American men and any male who tends toward a more aggressive, male-domineering paradigm. The actual term was born as feminists defined this specific style of masculinity. It appears that Machismo and its positive side known as Caballerismo, associated with chivalry and dedication to family, began with Spanish and Portuguese colonialism. There is some controversy (Mignolo, 2011) concerning when these behaviors began. For example, did they exist prior to colonialism? Even though ancient history was disregarded during the encroachment of colonialism with its overall disregard for indigenous knowledge, there are many examples suggesting an already established patriarchal model. For example, when the Spanish arrived in Peru the Spanish killed the supreme leader, the Sapa Inca (Quechua for “the only” Inca), Atahualpa (Hemming, 1993). Although Atahualpa had never attacked the Spaniards, he had warred with his brother, Huáscar, for the position of Sapa Inca, following the death of their father. This suggests a male-dominant model in that the Sapa Inca’s first wife was usually his sister, and he also married a number of princesses resulting in a large number of children (Hemming, 1993). The Inca culture was patriarchal despite the older legends, icons and architecture that bespoke of gender balance. As noted, a consideration that could explain these hierarchical, male-dominated systems seen in pre- and post-Colonialism would be that of Rupert Sheldrake’s *theory of morphogenetic resonance* as it explains how a consciousness shift can occur throughout the human field, establishing an almost global paradigm of male dominance (1988).

The term Marianismo was first used by Elsa Chaney (1984) to define the Madonna-Whore complex often exemplified in Latin American nations. Marianismo describes women who refrain from sex before marriage, who are faithful to their husband, family and more often than not, the church. The “whore” element in this complex is the highly sexualized woman. It is believed that this image of and for women was brought with the Spanish conquest and the idealization of the Virgin Mary, who is believed to represent the ultimate model for women. It seems to suggest that women were placed on a pedestal, but in reality the majority of women work hard and remain in the

background, subservient to their husbands. This is particularly evidenced in working class families (Stevens, 1977). Research of television ads in Mexican media still reveals dependent women being portrayed as helpful and focused on family, whereas portrayals of independent women tended to be sexualized (Villegas, Lemanski & Valdez, 2010). Thus, stereotypes of Marianismo and Machismo continue, resulting in limitations for both men and women.

Although many believe the role of males is to provide security for the women and children, the belief has stymied the possibilities for wholeness—and gender balance is about wholeness. Feminist anthropologists have pointed out the male bias in early anthropological research that privileged the role of males (Slocum 1975, Di Leonardo, 1991). In addition, according to more recent research (Fuentes, 2012), the beliefs that males have always been hunter-warriors and females responsible for hearth and childcare have been challenged. For example, anthropologist Agustin Fuentes (2012) explains that women hunted as well, although they hunted smaller game in order to be near the young children. This research shifts the way we look at gender and gender roles. Also, recently published research supports that as early cultures lived in bands, they were naturally more egalitarian. Dyble et al. (2015) believe that their “results suggest that pair-bonding and increased sex egalitarianism in human evolutionary history may have had a transformative effect on human social organization” (p. 796). One can see the progression that would eventually manifest in a patriarchal ideological system that subjugated women.

It appears that earlier humanity, and this is also true of indigenous peoples at this time, were intimately connected with the natural world. With the advent of the world’s religious ideals, humanity turned more toward the “sky god” and lost their connection to Nature (Mijares et al., 2007). The emergence of large corporations, focused on financial gains, has led to increasing destruction of Nature. The unification of Transpersonal Psychology and Ecopsychology (Davis, 2011) is needed. Sacred plants open the field for this to occur in profound ways.

The Role of Sacred Plants

Many people feel the need to create a new way of being human, one that includes a more harmonious relationship between genders as well as between humans and nature. According to Neil

White (2014), a presenter at the World Ayahuasca Conference in Santa Eulària des Riu, Ibiza, Spain, believes this is manifesting as a result of *group ceremonies* with ayahuasca (yagé) — a visionary plant medicine made from the combination of at least two plants from the Amazonian jungles. One of these plants is deemed feminine and the other masculine (Grob et al, 1996; McKenna, Callaway & Grob, 1998; Narby, 1999). For example, the Banisteriopsis caapi vine (ayahuasca) is considered to be masculine by indigenous peoples, whereas the Psychotria viridis (chacruna), a shrub, is considered to be feminine. McKenna, Callaway and Grob (1998), explain that this “brew is used for curing, for divination, as a diagnostic tool and a magical pipeline to the supernatural realm” (p. 67). Healers specializing in ayahuasca rituals (ayahuasqueros) claim to receive knowledge directly from the plants and maintain intimate relationships with the spirit world (Luna 1986).

The ceremonial context that White alluded to at the 2014 Ayahuasca Conference creates a sacred space for change to occur as women and men join together in ritual. Scholars of various sciences, public policy makers and shamans had gathered at this conference to discuss the role of Ayahuasca on a global level. Their final declaration included this statement:

Every human being should be free to choose ways and tools that facilitate healthy personal growth and spiritual development, to overcome mental or physical illness, and to nurture individual flourishing, social bonding and family life, as well as to cultivate spiritual meaning. Moreover, at a time when humans collectively are living on the precipice of social, environmental and economic crisis, it is vital that intercultural dialogue and holistic policies promote a sustainable existence for our species, embracing our diversity in a world with interconnected societies, in harmony with the planet and its other inhabitants. It is intrinsic to the evolution of humankind to seek new methods, and to improve those we have at hand, to effectively reach these goals (paragraph 2).

An increasing number of scholarly and non-scholarly books, articles, and discussions address this topic. Ralph Metzner (1999), for example, sought an explanation for the increased interest in ayahuasca in the West. He suggested that “the revival of shamanism and sacred plants is part of the worldwide trend seeking for a renewal of the

spiritual relationship with the natural world” and “a new awareness, or rather a revival of ancient awareness of the organic and spiritual interconnectedness of all life on this planet” (1999, p. 4). For many of the participants in ayahuasca ceremonies, nature is speaking through the plants and increasing numbers of people are realizing what they feel is the power of her voice, and her guidance toward healthier ways of living (Beyer, 2009; Campos, 2011; Narby, Kounen & Ravalec, 2009). Charles Grob notes the importance of “teaching plants” (2011) and points out their importance noting that they are a “blessing of immense proportion to humanity given the widespread environmental devastation, staggering economic disparities, increasing violent conflict throughout the world and frightening arsenals of conventional and nuclear weaponry” (p. 5). Humanity is facing some major challenges and for many the situation is related to the immense gender imbalance in the world (Mijares et al., 2007). The emergence of the use of ayahuasca and other sacred plants by Westerners seems to reveal a craving to repair this imbalance. Gender balance is marked in the ayahuasca brew in the fact that it is made by combining and cooking two plants, one female (Chacruna) and the other male (Ayahuasca).

A Changing Paradigm

Gender roles for women and men are undergoing significant change throughout the world (UN Women, 2012-2013 Report). Although as noted earlier, one can see that Mexican media continue to promote old stereotypes, Central and South America as well as the Caribbean have evidenced an increase in female leadership—surpassing that of the United States (Torregrosa, 2012). One example is that the small island of Cuba ranks 3rd statistically in the world for the number of women in parliamentary positions. There are increasing numbers of men who support these changes even though Latin American males are moving at a slower rate toward gender equality than men in many other nations (Baker & Verani, 2008).

One of the factors that has been suggested to facilitate these changes is that young Latin American women and men are beginning to reconnect with their ancient legends and to create related rituals and sustainable ways of living that honor Mother Earth (Pachamama and Pachapapa) (personal communications: Blanco, 2012; Calero, March 2015; Sanchez-Jimenez, 2013). These

changes appear to be encouraged through the ritual ceremonies with sacred plants. In fact, increasing numbers of people throughout the world are engaging in Latin American-style ceremonies. Evidence of this trend is seen in popular publications such as the Huffington Post and the LA Weekly, which have noted the increasingly widespread ingesting of sacred plants of the Amazon, such as ayahuasca. It is possible that this trend is contributing to reawakening of honoring of the feminine and Mother Earth (Madre Tierra/Pachamama) (Grob, 2011; Krippner in Mijares, 2015, Mijares, 2015). It can be seen as a response of the people to a major global imbalance.

In Costa Rica and other Latin American nations, Mijares has met young people who promote a new style of life (personal communication: Blanco, 2012, Calero, 2015, Sanchez-Jimenez, 2013). Similar to the hippies of the 60s, they exemplify new ways of being and living—espousing sustainable ways of living in harmony with the land. They recognize that humanity has been out of balance with nature for the last 6,000 years when patriarchal ideologies began to dominate, leading to the irreverence and raping of nature and the demeaning of the feminine (Mijares et al., 2007). Instead, these young Latin Americans are modeling gender balance and choosing to bring children into the world through conscious birthing processes. They also participate in “medicine” ceremonies where sacred medicinal plants—which they recognize as gifts of Mother Earth—provide to them psychological and spiritual guidance. These young Latin Americans exemplify the ancient legends in revering and living in harmony with Mother Earth (Madre Tierra/Pachamama).

At the same time increasing numbers of people from North America and European nations are traveling to South American nations, for example, Peru, Ecuador and Columbia, to ingest ayahuasca. A simple internet search quickly reveals the numerous healing centers along the Amazon, reflecting the growing interest in participating in ritual medicinal plant use.

Numerous researchers have studied the healing remedies of Mother Earth and especially the effects of ingesting ayahuasca (McKenna et al., 1998; Narby, 1999; Strassman, Wojtowicz, Luna, & Frecska, 2008). According to Strassman et al (2008), learning directly through nature provides grounding and healthy transformation. As increasing numbers of people combine sustainable ways of living with plant ceremonies, they tend toward positive life-affirming choices and behaviors. We propose that Pachamama clarifies what is needed

at a profound level through the ayahuasca experience. For example, Strassman et al (2008) explain: “According to nature-based religious traditions, plants possess intelligence. Many modern Westerners who have undergone a deep experience with ayahuasca speak of presence of a ‘personality’ in this botanical brew with which they communicate under this influence” (p. 8). More often than not, this “personality” is considered to be feminine in nature, as ayahuasca is referred to as “mother” or as “grandmother ayahuasca.” (Campos, 2011).

The Feminization of Ayahuasca

Expanding on this gender theme, Fotiou’s research with Western ayahuasca partakers illustrates that the gendered discourse surrounding these plants might be missing valuable lessons from indigenous cultures about gender balance. Fotiou calls this phenomenon the “feminization of ayahuasca.” Within her research population ayahuasca was generally perceived as a female and maternal spirit (Fotiau, 2010a; Fotiau, 2014). For example, the plant spirit is often described as being a “tough” but loving mother. Other qualities, traditionally related to femininity, are also attributed to ayahuasca. It is thought to develop intuition and connection to nature and all things spiritual and sacred.

This perception of the plant spirit as female only is complicated by the fact that not all healers shared this viewpoint and the fact that Amazonian shamanism is heavily dominated by men and is considered to be a “male domain.” The fact that ayahuasca has been used and is still used in sorcery and sorcery-related violence, such as shamanic warfare, further challenges this feminized view of ayahuasca. During Fotiou’s fieldwork, at least one shaman and his apprentice argued that the ayahuasca spirit is male and frequently shared stories of involvement in shamanic warfare.

In traditional Amazonian shamanism, ayahuasca had many uses that are not found in contemporary Peruvian mestizo shamanism. Among different ethnic groups it was used in communal singing and dancing men’s rituals, for locating game animals and divination, in warfare and conflict, to see faraway places, and for healing through communication with spirits. It was also important in native art, cosmology and ethno-astronomy, and in the Jaguar complex (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975). Ayahuasca was traditionally consumed by shamans (who were predominantly male) and by male members of the group. Because

the ayahuasca experience is challenging, through taking ayahuasca men learned bravery (McCallum, 2001), a quality they need in warship and hunting. Since women do not engage in such activities, in some ethnic groups, they do not need to take ayahuasca. If a woman wishes to try ayahuasca, however, she often can, as is the case among the Cashinahua. Westerners often perceive this as an indication of sexism, but the authors caution against this, due to the male bias of the Western gaze that was mentioned earlier in this article.

This has provided some background against the ways in which ayahuasca and Amazonian shamanism are perceived among contemporary ayahuasca partakers. The vast majority of the people interviewed by Fotiou referred to ayahuasca as a female entity and the same pattern was observed while browsing online discussion forums. The following are statements by contemporary ayahuasca partakers:

She is a female energy. She is very strong, very powerful.

Lately, I've been thinking about how demanding yet nurturing she is. How she can scold you like a stern mother and soothe you to total bliss (Fotiou, 2010).

An issue that is often perceived by Westerners as underlying sexism in indigenous shamanism is the exclusion of menstruating women from ceremonies. Fotiou (2010a, 2014) was not able to get a consensus from shamans on the reasoning behind this prohibition, nor could sexism be confirmed as a cause for the exclusion. Other explanations were offered. For example, one of the shamans around Iquitos said:

The understanding is that the energetic scent of the menstruation is repugnant to medicine spirits. So they don't want to come around. The medicine spirits don't like gore, they don't really like blood, they don't like all the things that are traditionally, typically human. They don't particularly like sex, they don't like spices; they don't like any of that stuff, unless it's energetically right for your body (Fotiou, 2010a).

Other scholars have already pointed out that menstrual taboos rather than subordinating women, they protect them and offer them more autonomy and social control (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). It is possible that such taboos were interpreted as a

sign of sexism because of the underlying sexism in the culture of early ethnographers. According to several ethnographies, for indigenous Amazonians, women are more visible to spirits when they menstruate, and therefore they are in greater danger from spirit attacks involving seduction, rape, and jealousy from female spirits (Kensinger, 1995). Another perspective is that menstruating women both attract and repel the physical manifestation of spirits (McCallum, 2001). These ideas are often misunderstood and misinterpreted by both contemporary practitioners (shamans) and ceremony participants that might be framing them within a patriarchal framework.

In previous publications (Fotiou, 2010a; Fotiou, 2010b), the prevalence of sorcery and shamanic warfare among contemporary ayahuasca shamans is discussed, as well as the backlash in the ayahuasca community against it. Amazonian shamanism is perceived as sexist and having undesirable traits, all related to maleness. The reaction to this is to seek out female shamans, who are rare and scattered in the area. A relatively recent development is the creation of an ayahuasca retreat that specializes in female shamanism, honoring the "Divine Feminine" and working with "Female Energy."

This is what the creators of the retreat stated on their website (<http://www.templeoftheway-oflight.org/>) in 2010:

Shamanic practices and the ancients from around the world have long revered the Mother (along and in balance with the Father) for millennia – the Earth, the Great Mother, Pachamama. It is believed by many scholars that it was the eruption of violence as perpetrated by the newer, male dominated cultures that obliterated the peaceful, earth honoring ways of Goddess worship and paved the way for the strong hold of Christianity and eventually the obliteration of the Goddess from religion, religious texts and teachings.

It became clear to us at the Temple that by offering ceremonies exclusively run by female healers -curanderas (working with Mother Ayahuasca, connecting to Mother Earth) that we would be connecting with Divine Feminine Energy. We believe that the spiritual awakening that we see all over the planet is an effect of the Divine Feminine being reborn in each of us again. As we were each starved from the Divine Feminine energy, it is now being craved from every angle.

Divine feminine energy is comprised of qualities such as love, understanding, compassion, nurturing, and helpfulness to others. It includes tenderness; gentleness, kindness and these are the qualities that we help you to reconnect with and are the true nature of the female.

Many will find no problem with this type of statement. They might even find it empowering. The problem that many gender scholars (Butler, 1990) would point out is that, despite its good intentions, this kind of discourse perpetuates stereotypes of gender dualism and promotes an essentialist gender discourse. In addition, it makes certain assumptions about the nature of indigenous shamanism that are overly simplistic. Feminist anthropologists (Geller and Stockett, 2006) have discarded dualisms of gender and have moved to more nuanced analyses.

Indigenous gender discourse seems to offer that nuance. First, as was already mentioned, the ayahuasca brew consists of at least two plants with differently perceived gendered spirits, ayahuasca (a vine with a male spirit) and chacruna (a shrub with a female spirit). This reflects the findings of researchers such as Bustos (2008) who mentions that the ayahuasca spirit is perceived by the Asháninka as male and the spirit of chacruna as female. The fact that both plants are needed for the powerful visionary effects of the brew suggests gender complementarity. Furthermore, it would be simplistic, and would impose Western frameworks on indigenous worldviews, to assume that because women were not as central in Amazonian shamanism, they were less valued. Firstly, the presence of women in shamanism might have been underestimated in the literature, as Colpron (2005) has argued, and several scholars (McCallum, 2001; Overing, 1984; Santos-Granero, 1986) have shown that Amazonian cultures have a division of labor based on egalitarian complementarity.

Western intellectual thought's association of "nature" with femininity is linked to women's marginalization and classification as second or lesser to men (Ortner, 1972). Women have been defined in opposition to men and much like nature have been perceived as something to be conquered and dominated by "man." However, the discourse that views ayahuasca as a solely feminine spirit promotes an unrealistic view of indigenous knowledge and worldview. Although it attempts to reverse essentialist gender discourse and bring "feminine" qualities into the mainstream by perceiving them as positive, it risks perpetuating the same essentialist discourses and creates the

danger of further marginalization of indigenous knowledge as well as the feminine that it desires to elevate. Certain ways of gendering the spirit world, as the case of ayahuasca shows, perpetuate ideologies of separate gender spheres and the obvious power relations between them.

Along the lines of this feminization of ayahuasca as well as the previously discussed craving to restore balance among contemporary partakers of sacred plants, is a more recent development that Fotiou observed in 2014 in the Peruvian Amazon. A shaman often guides what he calls "Luna y Sol" (Moon and Sun) ceremonies. They consist of an ayahuasca ceremony in the evening, which is followed by a San Pedro ceremony on the next day (after a few hours of rest). In this case ayahuasca is perceived to be feminine and San Pedro masculine. The goal is said to be "restoring balance" by bringing together the feminine and the masculine, the day and the night, the moon and the sun, the positive and the negative (Fotiau, unpublished manuscript).

This and other trends discussed earlier in the article indicate a clear movement toward gender complementarity. However, given the fact that the ayahuasca brew consists of at least two plants that create the synergistic effect, and that without the presence of both the brew would not be effective, it is safe to assume that an approach that focuses more on the *complementarity* of genders embedded within the ayahuasca brew itself would be closer to the indigenous worldview—something that has been adequately argued for Andean cultures. Even though women did not participate in ayahuasca ceremonies or become shamans in most Amazonian cultures, this should not immediately lead to conclusions about women being the "second sex." Looking more closely at Amazonian ethnographies shows that even the symbolism, myths, and rituals that separate female and male spheres actually reinforce the idea that men and women cannot exist without one another, but rather complement each other, much like the evidence from ancient cultures discussed earlier in the article. Thus, Fotiou proposes a more nuanced interpretation, which does not only focus on the female component of the ayahuasca brew but on the complementarity of the two plant spirits, which will reveal not only the wisdom and complexity of indigenous knowledge and medicine, but will provide with a more radical view of gender unity and equity that challenges the dualistic paradigm that has dominated gender discourse in the West.

Conclusions

Although one can find similar legends, architecture and ceremonial icons throughout the planet, it appears that Latin America has a specific focus on gender and its relationship to nature. This is supported by the increasing numbers of people from Asia, Europe, Middle East, North American and Scandinavian nations traveling to Peru and nearby countries to partake in Ayahuasca ceremonies (Campos, 2011; Grunwell, 1998). These people report a sense of being called by “la medicina” (the medicine), as ayahuasca is often called. For many people, these ceremonies hold the potential for materializing much-needed gender balance and gender healing as Mother Earth is communicating directly through her plants.

Many young Latin Americans, both male and female, are equally participating in ceremonies and also creating sustainable ways of living in balance with nature. For example, approximately 500 representatives from various Latin American nations travel annually to a large gathering that takes place annually in Colombia to share knowledge of sustainable building and gardening and to join in ceremonies during that time. Jorge Calero, a primary leader in these endeavors explains that the goal is to preserve “the integrity of Mother Earth on their lands” (Calero, personal communication, March 7, 2015).

As increasing numbers of people espouse new ways of living—ways that include gender equity—turning to indigenous ways of knowing becomes more central. This could be why increasing numbers of people around the world are ingesting the sacred plants of Latin America. The craving of gender balance is reflected in contemporary ceremonies that combine ayahuasca and San Pedro, among other trends. As people are seeking guidance from the spirits, many propose (Grob, 2011; Mijares, 2015) that perhaps Pachamama is guiding them in some mysterious way to re-discover the power of the earth and the ancient feminine—and to reunite heaven and earth on cellular/biological and spiritual levels.

The evidence discussed in this article indicates a movement toward gender complementarity among contemporary partakers of sacred plants. This makes it even more imperative to acknowledge the wisdom of the indigenous cultures from which Westerners have borrowed the use of sacred plants in order to avoid projecting Western biases and to facilitate learning from these previously marginalized ways of knowledge.

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