This research report investigates how a group of highly accomplished indigenous Shipibo healers, based in the Peruvian Amazon, learned to become skilled healers.

Although the Shipibo healers are from a very different cultural paradigm and context to Western organisational life, this report aims to bring the two worlds into conversation with one another. By investigating processes of learning and healing for these Shipibo healers, we attempt to shed light on the question: What can managers and developers in Western organisations learn from the Peruvian Amazon?

The research was carried out through in-depth interviews with thirteen healers. Of the thirteen, ten were interviewed in pairs, representing an older healer, often with more than fifty years of experience, and their next-generation apprentice. All the healers were recognized as leading practitioners both within their own communities and by the growing number of Westerners drawn to the Peruvian Amazon to work with them.

Six common themes emerged from the interviews:

1. The significance of family background (shamanic lineage) and individual sense of vocation.
2. Learning directly from nature in the form of undergoing long, rigorous plant diets.
3. Learning from dreams.
4. Learning by doing - that is observing, being shown and practicing.
5. Undergoing trials and challenges.
6. How learning to become a shaman was changing across the generations.

From the interviews, three types of learning outcomes, or types of knowing, were identified:

i. Knowledge about (abstract knowledge/facts).
ii. Knowing how things relate.
iii. Knowing what to do.
A model of learning is put forward in the report in which these three different learning outcomes both mediate and are mediated by the cultural paradigm in which they occur, the types of experience that cultural paradigm facilitates and the way those experiences are interpreted.

Using the work of Iain McGilchrist in neuroscience, C.J. Jung in depth psychology, and cultural historians such as Richard Tarnas, the report contrasts more holistic, experiential ways of knowing, as evidenced in the kind of learning used to become a healer, with more reductionist ways of knowing, generally taught in Western educational institutions.

A key finding of the report is that Shipibo healers operate with a more holistic style of learning than that found in most Western learning environments. The short answer, therefore, to the question of what Western managers and developers can learn from Shipibo shamans is to adopt more holistic ways of knowing/learning and the disciplines that go with those. Interestingly, within the field of management development, there are many signs that this is already happening, especially with the use of more arts-based methods of development.

Five further themes arising from the interviews that are related to holistic learning and that are particularly relevant to managerial work, are discussed. These are: situated learning; the importance of intuition in decision-making; personal discipline and mastery; servant leadership; and presence.

The Shipibo, in common with indigenous people all over the world, face many threats to their traditional forms of existence. The hope of the authors of this report is that, by showing what can be learnt from leading practitioners of traditional medicine within this culture, the extraordinary, unique and rich culture of the Shipibo people can be further re-evaluated, revitalised and strengthened.
Introduction

Despite the heat of the sun, with no shade to be found outside of the houses, the soft red dirt of the roads has become thick mud with a coating of algae from the rains in the previous days. As we walk, our boots collect heavy cakes of the mud, making our journey increasingly difficult. We have arrived by boat, several hours down the Ucayali River (Figure 1) from the city of Pucallpa, the frontier of the Peruvian Amazon. As some of the only ‘gringos’ visible on the streets, it is clear that we are strangers here.

We make our way across the small town to the house of the healer we are visiting—just on the other side of the football field. It is a traditional longhouse, with several rooms, a large open ceremony space, no doors, and no furniture aside from thin mattresses on the floor, and with hammocks strung about to lounge in during the heat of the day. Most of the once-lush forest around the village has been cleared by loggers, but in the chakra (garden) behind the house are some banana trees, as well as an impressive collection of native medicinal plants. We will be staying here to do a plant dieta—to learn about plants in the way that Shipibo healers have always learned about plants, and to heal.

The Shipibo are an ethnic group indigenous to the Peruvian Amazon. Shipibo healers are renowned across the Amazon, and increasingly across the world, for their abilities and extensive knowledge of medicinal plants. These are the people that, in their own language, are called Onanya, in Spanish Médico/a or Maestro/a, which is translated in English as healer or shaman. In this report, for future ease of reference, we will call these people healers.

Shipibo healers have an understanding of healing that focuses not just on the body of the individual, but which takes a holistic view of the health of the individual, the family, the community, and the ecosystem. For example, in addition to physical ailments, someone may seek out the services of a healer if they have had a bad harvest, or have been unsuccessful at fishing. Healers maintain relationships between the human and non-human parts of the ecosystem, as well as between the material and spirit realms, ensuring that all parts are relating together harmoniously. An individual is perceived as healthy only when all of these spheres and all of their relationships are functioning well.

The health of an organisation can be viewed in much the same way, requiring that all elements of the system work together in order to be successful. Our research project set out to investigate what Western organisations and leaders can learn from Shipibo perspectives on healing, and how these healers have learned to manage their communities and ecosystems in this way.

We conducted a series of in depth interviews with thirteen respected healers in and around Pucallpa, Peru, to answer three questions:

i. How do Shipibo healers learn their craft?
ii. How is this changing over the last generation?
iii. What can Western organisations and their leaders and those charged with developing those organisations learn from Shipibo perspectives on healing and learning?

This research project explicitly counters the five hundred year colonialist and modernist legacy, which has imposed European religions, education systems, and lifestyles on indigenous Amazonian peoples for hundreds of years, and has severely changed the social and physical landscape of the region. Before the rich culture and knowledge of the Shipibo are further obscured with increasing globalisation and urbanisation, we want to allow the voices of Shipibo healers to share their own experiences about learning to become masterful at their craft.
Guided imagining

It is likely that most readers of this report will have little direct familiarity with the Peruvian Amazon and its people. In order to help bridge that gap, we'd like you to join us in a guided imagining of what the childhood was like for many of the healers we interviewed who grew up in small riverbank communities.

Imagine yourself growing up as a child in the Peruvian Amazonian rainforest fifty years ago. It is always hot and humid. In some months, heavy rain falls from the skies for days. Then, everyone stays at home. You live in a small compound, cut out of the surrounding jungle, with your large extended family in longhouses. Their structures are made from wood carefully chosen and cut down from the surrounding forest and roofs made of palm leaves (Figure 2).

Your father is a fisherman. There are plentiful and many different kinds of fish in the vast river Ucayali that is close to where you live and also in the nearby cocha (ox-bow lake). There are huge fish in the cocha called paiche that are bigger than a fully-grown man. You are never hungry because of the abundance of fish, and of animals that can be hunted in the jungle. (Theorists fifty years later will call this state of affairs ‘la economia de la abundancia’ - the abundant economy). Additionally you eat the basic food crops that your family grows such as bananas, yucca, and corn, as well as all the wild fruit that can be found in the jungle.

There is no money. There is no school. You learn from your family and from the jungle - where to find food, how to avoid the many perils such as poisonous snakes and dangerous animals, especially el tigre (the jaguar). If you are a boy, you learn how to make bows and arrows, spears, and to build canoes in order to hunt and fish. If you are a girl, your mother teaches you to weave cloth, how to dye it with resins gathered from the trees and other plants of the jungle and how to embroider the beautiful, traditional Shipibo designs. You learn how to make ceramics from the special clay that can be found nearby.

The jungle is enchanted. Everything is alive and has its proper spirit. Magic is an everyday occurrence. Witchcraft is real.

Your father is a well-known healer. Many people come to him at night to sit in the ceremonies he holds where he drinks a special combination of two plants (the vine ayahuasca and the plant chakruna) that he has cooked together beforehand for at least 24 hours whilst singing songs over the brew. Drinking this mixture of plants gives him visions and allows him to see the illnesses of the people who come to him to be cured. Lengthy training that he has accomplished has taught him how to sing the appropriate healing songs (called icaros) that enable his patients to heal. Your mother also has an extensive knowledge of medicinal plants and heals her family using the different plants of the jungle. For her, the jungle is an abundant pharmacy.

"Yes, I learned because my father was a shaman, a 'médico'. He planted the plants in our garden, many plants. For drinking for bathing, to put on painful bones, headaches, stomach aches... all kinds of plants there were. He would tell me this plant is this, this is this, this is for drinking, this is for that. That is how he taught me. Of these things I have not forgotten, and that is how I was raised by my father." (Maestra Gabriela)

1 Names of healers have been changed to protect their privacy, and resemblance to any actual names is merely coincidental.
The Shipibo

The Shipibo are one of the most populous of the 65 different ethnic groups indigenous to the Peruvian Amazon. They number around 35,000 and have traditionally been based along the river Ucayali, (which further downriver joins the river Marañon and becomes the Amazon), and its tributaries. There are now also Shipibo communities in Lima, and in other areas of Peru. Pucallpa is the largest city in this region of Eastern Peru and home to a large indigenous population who have migrated from their rural communities in search of work and better education for their children.

Animism

The Shipibo, in common with all Amazonian peoples, have a complex and sophisticated cosmovision, which is now changing as they have growing contact with foreigners, and Western technologies and worldviews. This contact most strongly influences the younger Shipibos, who are being educated in schools with Western-based educational practices and curriculums. This mixing of worldviews results in complex interactions, adaptations, and transformations, and is threatening to disrupt the relationship that Shipibo have cultivated with their natural environments over generations.

Traditionally, the Shipibo have an animistic worldview. This worldview leads people to experience everything in nature (animals, plants, trees, rocks, rivers, landscapes) as alive and as having its own subjectivity, intelligence and spirit. Amazonian animism, in particular, is characterized by having a singular mode of relating with all beings, whether human, animal, spirit, or plant, which implies that there is a social continuity between humans and the rest of the ecosystem.

One of the leading contemporary Amazonian anthropologists, Viveiros de Castro (2000), describes this view in which humans and nonhumans share a sense of ‘humanity’ as ‘perspectivism’. Such perspectivism lends itself to an egalitarian understanding of the construction of reality, in which each natural object is seen as a potential subject, and objects are only defined relationally to a given subject. Human beings are no longer the only or even the most privileged subjects. As anthropologist Eduardo Kohn (2013) describes it, this is an “ecosystem of selves”.

This is in sharp differentiation from mechanistic worldviews prevalent in the West, in which the workings of the world can only be explained in rational, scientific terms based on mathematical cause and effect relationships. According to the mechanistic worldview, nothing in nature, apart from the possible exception of human beings, has a soul or spirit.

Shipibo healing

The work done by Shipibo healers is deeply rooted in the animistic worldview and cannot be understood outside this context. The healing process occurs primarily through the use of healing songs called icaros. During ceremonies, in which the healer drinks the visionary plant mixture known as ayahuasca, these songs are sung in order to heal or protect people from illness. Healing is enabled by entering into the right relationship with specific medicinal plants, which are seen to be powerful spirits and teachers in their own right.

“Plant spirits teach you, they teach and we have to learn. The plant itself teaches you, teaches you things for healing.”   (Maestra Gabriela)

Through a long and involved learning process that involves extended plant diets, Shipibo healers come to learn their healing practices through direct relationship and communion with plants. Dietas involve long periods of time from ten days to a year or more, of prolonged contact with a single plant. The plant is usually taken internally after a specific preparation unique to each plant, and is sometimes also administered through plant baths. During the whole period of the dieta, there are stringent food and behavioural restrictions.

“It takes a long time to become a Maestro. It is an education. It is like any young person going to school. First preschool, then elementary, then high school, then university. It is the same for shamanism in order to become a Maestro. But now, there are people who drink ayahuasca for one or two years, then they think they are a ‘Maestro’. They teach: they run dietas. To be a proper Maestro you have to diet for a long time, years and years. That’s what it takes to learn shamanism, in order to be able to learn to heal.”   (Maestro Roberto)
Our research stance

We do not believe in conventional notions of objectivity nor that objectivity is the most important criteria to validate knowledge. Early twentieth century quantum physics has demonstrated that the observer always influences what is being observed. This seems self-evident in the social sciences. The researcher always has a stance, a worldview from which they engage with the people they are researching. In the words of the philosopher, Thomas Nagel (1986) there is no "view from nowhere", and social research always occurs in a relational, cultural and political context.

We both recognize that as foreigners from European lineages, we occupy a privileged position in the world. We have further been raised immersed in a rational, mechanistic worldview, which privileges knowledge gained from reductionist scientific methods. Part of our own healing process in working with Shipibo has been to explore our ancestral histories, and the shadow side of this privilege, which has led to the oppression of other peoples globally.

Maestra Gabriela, one of the older healers we interviewed, said:

"Before, the Shipibo people spoke the Shipibo language. And now, their mums, their dads, and down to the littlest ones are speaking only Castellano [trans. Spanish]. And they cannot speak the Shipibo language. What we are doing is ending our customs, they do not wear embroidered skirts, everyone is dressed like mestizos, and this is growing ... But before, it wasn’t like this. We learned when we were little, embroidering, sewing, and we prepared plants, and we learned there. But now these things are ending. This pains me. This is why I have my grandsons and granddaughters, and I sometimes say to them: “Don’t stop learning.”

This loss of a culture so different from our own, and which has much to teach us, also pains us.

Interview process

We conducted eight separate interviews lasting between one and two hours with 13 healers—six men and seven women. Ten healers were interviewed in pairs of teacher and apprentice. The thirteen healers were selected on the basis that each was known personally to one or both of the researchers as an experienced and effective healer with a high level of personal integrity. None of the interviewees were under 40 years of age.

More detailed information about the interview process can be found in Appendix Two.

Interview study site

We interviewed healers in two Shipibo communities - seven in the growing urban sprawl of Pucallpa and six in a more remote rural community five hours in a fast boat from Pucallpa, or nine hours by slow boat, which still has a large amount of intact surrounding forest. By interviewing healers living in these two very different communities we attempt to describe some of the breadth and heterogeneity of their experiences.
Themes from the interviews related to learning

From analysis of our interviews with the Shipibo healers, six themes emerged as important aspects of the learning process involved in becoming a healer.

Significance of family and vocation

Particularly relating to our questions of how Shipibo healers learn their craft and how this process is changing, it was important to understand how they made the choice to become healers in the first place. One important piece of this is the family history. Each of the healers that we interviewed had come from a long family lineage of healers and a number of them had started training as young as 12 years old.

“Both my maternal and paternal grandfathers were médicos [healers]. It comes from this generation.” (Maestro Roberto)

“Well, what my father tells me is that years after the niwe [trans. wind] came, he demanded that I be his replacement. And now, I thought for almost two years before starting to diet.” (Tomas, talking about how he had started on the path to be a healer, following the instruction of his father, Maestro Martin)

“My mother is a médico. She has been drinking ayahuasca since she was 14 years old. Traditionally at that age parents would give men their daughters. My mother, as a minor, was given away to a man. But the man was a médico, an ayahuasquero [trans. a healer who drinks ayahuasca]. Also, her grandfather, they say he was an ayahuasquero. A médico, too, a Muraya. Yes, my mother’s grandfather. There are other grandparents, too.” (Maestra Victoria’s daughter and apprentice Eliana)

“My parents were also healers, shamans. My father’s father, my grandfather, was a Muraya.” (Maestro Carlos)

Of the four lineages represented in our interviews, at least three of them claim to have had grandparents who were considered to be Muraya. This, for the Shipibo, is the highest level one can attain as a healer. Notably, all the healers we interviewed were agreed on the fact that there are no longer any living Muraya. The main reasons given for this were that no one had the dedication or time anymore to do what was necessary to become a Muraya.

“Muraya is a higher rank in the world of alternative or traditional medicine, but the Murayas have disappeared already. The Murayas no longer exist... In the Shipibo world, there might have been 5 or 6 Murayas, that is all...Why did the Murayas disappear? The Shipibos have not continued practicing. It was a 10 years preparation. Not anyone reached that level. It was a very strict diet, and over time, when the scientific medicine arrived, the Shipibo practiced medicine rarely. It was easier to go to the pharmacy and take that. However, somehow the traditional medicine remains in some places, as we do; but very few.” (Maestro Marco)

“It is hard to find the soga [a tree], difficult. Before there were muraya, before there was Yasu [another plant].” (Maestro Roberto)

Many of the healers – particularly the women - we interviewed were motivated to become healers by their desire to be able to heal their families should any illnesses arise.

“I learned to sing to be able to cure people who had illnesses. To free them from evil intentions and to open other worlds to those who wanted to see.” (Maestra Natalia)

Regarding the decision to become a healer, there was a sense that many of the interviewees were naturally attracted to becoming healers and/or, from an early age, had a strong sense of vocation about this that may have been seen in them by their families. Others were more driven by a curiosity about the medicine and the spirit realms, and an attraction to the icaros (songs).

“She wanted to learn. She liked his [her husband’s] songs.” (Eliana, talking about her mother and teacher Maestra Victoria)

“So one night I heard him singing. Very nice, I liked it. So in the morning, I told him “I want to learn too.” He laughed and said, “Are you going to be capable?” “Why not?” I replied.” (Maestro Jaime)

“Since I was a child I wanted to experience the medicines, because it is something that feels really natural to me, wanting to know through the medicines how the spiritual world is organized, and I learned to drink ayahuasca when I was 18.” (Maestro Marco)

“When I was four months old, the Maestro of my father gifted to me the power of his wind, and I grew up with this wind. Later I went to a ceremony with my father and asked him for my dieta, and I completed it.” (Maestra Patricia)

Plants as teachers - the Importance of dietas

During a dieta, the healers learn the specific character and healing qualities of the plant through both dreams and visions during ayahuasca ceremonies. Furthermore, they establish a mutually beneficial alliance with that plant spirit for conducting healing work.

“When I was born and raised, no-one taught me or explained to me about the plants, telling me what they were for. I dreamed. While I slept sometimes they called me - “Don’t pass out, let’s talk.” (Maestra Victoria’s daughter and apprentice Eliana)
As demonstrated above, Shipibo healers often pass on their knowledge by apprenticing a family member of the younger generation. However, it is clear from our interviews that the primary teachers of Shipibo healers are also considered to be the plants themselves.

“The plants teach us to heal, also for us not to speak bad things, to be well, and not harm others. The plants don’t want to do harm.” (Maestra Patricia)

“The powers we have, the energetic powers or the knowledge we have about medicine belongs to all the kinds of plants we do dietas with ... Then, within the ayahuasca, when you enter into trance, the same plants’ spirits come and guide you: they show you.” (Maestro Marco)

There were also comments about the importance of doing ongoing dietas, no matter how many one had done in the past.

“The healer always has to be updating the medicine. Why? Because as we are doing treatment, in the ceremony, the medicines are also losing strength. Then, one has to do a dieta, to be able to charge again one’s energetic powers.” (Maestro Marco)

“Western medicine studies do not end. They do not tell you “up to here”. They continue discovering things. It is the same with shamanism. That is why Maestro Roberto does not stop dieting. He continues because it has penetrated his body. If he leaves it, he is going to faint.” (Eduardo talking about his teacher and uncle Maestro Roberto)

Learning from dreams

All the healers mentioned that a significant way of learning during dietas was accomplished through dreams. It was often in dreams that people would be taught and shown how to heal.

“With the plants, they teach me in dreams. When you drink and bathe in them, they make you dream. They tell you “Do this and that”; what not to eat. They let you know, they tell you. This you have to obey. If you don’t obey, it goes away ... Sometimes in dreams they sing too, teaching you how you have to sing. How to sing to heal, how to sing to clean, and so on.” (Maestra Gabriela)

“When I started to bathe in plants, they didn’t teach me right away. One bath, two, three, four, only in the fifth bath did it finally teach me. A pretty woman, very beautiful, sat down and taught me how to use it. You are not going to do this, not going to eat that. Everything has to be like this, like I tell you. That was my first dream that it made me dream. That was in my dream, yes. So, because of what the plant told me and taught me, I followed this path. And I had respect. Because the plants, when you use them well, very well! When you diet, they will teach you lots and lots of information: how to cure, what sickness does a patient have, with what plant you will cure that sickness.” (Maestra Gabriela’s daughter and apprentice Melina)

“And dreams also warned me. When I slept the plants made me dream that a woman came with a sickness, that in this certain part the sickness was located, that with this certain plant I would cure her. And so, she then arrived. Before they arrive, the dreams notify us, they communicate with us. That is why is good to connect with the plants because they tell you what is going to happen.” (Maestra Gabriela’s daughter and apprentice Melina)

“In dreams, the spirit of the plant comes and tells us what and how we should smoke so we can create the right saliva” (Maestra Natalia talking of her dieta with the tobacco plant, which enables her to suck illness out of people using her saliva as a protective barrier)

Learning by doing

Singing icaros is the main means that Shipibo healers use to heal their patients. When asked how they learned how to sing icaros, the healers unanimously said they learned through singing. There was very little premeditation or outside instruction in learning how to sing. The healers would observe their teachers singing, and perhaps learn words this way, but the appropriate song to heal each person came as an intuition from the plants. It was channelled rather than consciously chosen.

“When the icaro comes, you have to start singing. You should not hold it in but let it out. To let out what you see, what the medicine is teaching you ... An idea comes to you that you want to sing this. That, you should follow. This is how you learn. I have learnt like this.” (Maestro Roberto’s apprentice and nephew Eduardo)

“In that moment, a thought will come to me to sing, to sing in a certain way that will heal the patient. That is the way it is.” (Maestra Patricia)

“The songs, the icaros, are not an invention of the Maestro. The songs are the medicine’s channels. Whatever comes to mind, one does ... One does not choose it ...The icaros present themselves from one moment to another. It is not because I am going to do it with this icaro, no ... One sings and sings, because there are many types of icaros for different kinds of diseases. There is not one icaro only. An icaro to cheer up the person, an icaro to clean the negative energies in the stomach, an icaro to help the person concentrate.” (Maestro Marco)

“Yes, my father teaches me a lot. Whatever he knows, he teaches. “Son, this is good, this is bad. This is for doing this, this is to do that. And that is why I always practice, practice, practice when I am in ceremony. Each ceremony, I practice, practice and that is how little by little I am advancing some.” (Tomas, the son and apprentice of Maestro Martin)
Challenges of this work

All the interviewees emphasized the length, difficulties, and challenges of the path to becoming a healer within their tradition. Sexual abstinence and other rigors of doing long dietas were often mentioned.

“I first dieted when I was twelve, with my brothers ... Also my two nephews. We dieted for a year and a half, eighteen months ... This is a very strong dieta ... My brothers and I were secluded from people at a distance. Only my mother was allowed to approach us. My father and brothers and I would do ceremonies there ... We ate very dried fish, no salt or sugar. We drank tobacco juice. I almost could not stand it. I cried a lot. I was a child!” (Maestro Roberto)

“The dieta is strict and you have to follow it. If you do not follow it, it is the same as nothing. You do a dieta but you are not learning anything.” (Eduardo, apprentice and nephew of Maestro Roberto)

“Only one plant at a time. That is how to enter into a first dieta. To learn how to enter into a first dieta is very hard. Everything with patience. One doesn’t learn fast.” (Maestra Victoria’s daughter and apprentice Eliana)

“Because it is not easy. In the most difficult times, because you are on a dieta, you cannot do anything. You cannot work, because you are in a purification stage, a devotion stage, energetically.” (Maestro Marco)

“After this, [when her daughter was born] once she dieted this plant, she never had sexual relations with another man again. Rather she has to go on like a saint. Like you are dieting like a saint.” (Eliana, talking about her mother, Maestra Victoria)

“Learning is not easy. One must fight, one must suffer. Especially while fasting. Diet all day. Just water. That is how one learns.” (Maestra Gabriela’s apprentice and daughter Melina)

There are also considerable risks in following this path.

“When she is in dieta, there are tests. When you are dieting, anything can happen. You could eat something and block your dieta. And the plants themselves do harm to you, give you tests, make you sick. So, once again you commit to your dieta, once again you drink ayahuasca to continue your dieta. To continue it with more days, months, years.” (Eliana translating for her mother Maestra Victoria)

“Noya Rao is very dangerous. Thus, if you want to learn, learn but learn well, thinking. You can get crazy, you can run into the water ... That is why you have to be careful.” (Maestro Jaime, talking about one of the trees, Noya Rao, also called Palo Voladora, that he has dieted.)

“Palo Voladora is very jealous. Very delicate. We can die.” (Tomas, the son of Maestro Martin, talking about dieting with the tree Palo Voladora/Noya Rao)

“One failure in one dieta and you can die. There are many people who have not followed the dieta and have died.” (Maestro Marco)

Additionally, many of the healers experience psychic attacks from other shamans, envious of their abilities and/or success.

“Sometimes they have closed my icaros, they have followed all my dietas, but now I am feeling more at ease. I have more calm and strength. It is a constant battle.” (Maestro Roberto’s nephew and apprentice Eduardo)

Changes across generations

Since we interviewed healers from two different generations, we were able to get a view of how the learning process is changing for the younger generation of healers. We also asked their opinions about why there are so few young Shipibo becoming healers. Although many mentioned that the younger generation is simply not interested in the healing path, the issue is also complicated by economic needs. In today’s market economy, schooling and working to make a living and provide for their families prevents many young people from having enough time to devote to learning traditional healing, even when they do have the interest and desire.

“Maybe they were not born for that. I don’t know.” (Maestro Jaime)

“They just don’t want to do it. What we do, they can’t endure it. They can’t endure avoiding alcohol and other things. They don’t like it.” (Maestra Patricia)

“What happens is that the youngsters do not practice the medicine because they mostly dedicate to studies, but with the western customs. If a person does not do studies, they are practically nothing in society, and in fact they must have a career for the sustenance of their families. So, they leave aside the medicine a bit. And apart from that, when studying in the university or the institute they cannot be doing medicine on the side, because to study the medicine the person needs to devote full time. And besides, the youngsters do not give much importance to traditional medicine now, for the time and dedication that it needs.” (Maestro Marco)

“Yes, things are like this. Maybe one can think that the medicine, that learning the medicine is easy, but it is not; it needs time, no? And currently, that is what stops young people today. I think this.” (Maestro Carlos)

“But the thing is that the young people don’t see it as important. They don’t see the importance in it. There are some who do, who want to know and learn about the plants. But the majority of the young people learn from books. From the book. Here in the forest, that is what they learn from most, because this doesn’t require a long dieta. I don’t know how many days or months of dieta it is. But with plants, when you start to dieta, when you enter the dieta, then the dieta is very long. Months pass...5 months, 8 months, or a year! That is why for them it is a little difficult. It is easier from the books.” (Maestra Gabriela’s apprentice and daughter Melina)
Bringing it all together

A model of knowledge production

Based on our interviews with Shipibo healers, we created a model of knowledge production (Figure 3) in which learning outcomes are achieved by interactions between cultural paradigm, pre-conceptual experience, and interpretation of experience. These three domains are mutually constitutive, and feedback on each other in order to produce three types of knowledge: knowledge about, knowing how things relate, and knowing what to do.

Cultural paradigm

Shipibo healers utilise both reductionist and holistic, as well as abstract and intuitive methods of learning at different times. However, as a broad generalisation, we would say that the healers we interviewed operate with a more holistic style of learning than that found in most Western learning environments. Shipibo healers are situated in a specific cultural paradigm.

This provides the underlying basis for their epistemology, which determines what is accepted as valid grounds for knowing and what is considered knowledge. For each of us, learning and knowledge construction occurs within a culturally constructed paradigm, or perhaps better – a set of overlapping paradigms, which could be organisational and/or national and/or professional, among other spheres. These sets of paradigms would be different for Shipibos and for Europeans, and may also be different for Shipibos living in the city compared with those living in more rural communities.

The importance of dreams and visions, which emerged as an important theme in our research, is a good example to illustrate the different epistemological frameworks. Within the reductionist paradigm generally adopted in Western academic institutions, intuitive forms of knowing are often devalued compared with knowledge that is obtained scientifically, due to the emphasis on a perceived objective external world. However, within the Shipibo cultural epistemology, knowledge obtained through intuition and dreams is highly valued.

In Table 1, we emphasize the spectrum of difference between reductionist and holistic ways of knowing and learning. Rather than try to fit the Shipibo paradigm into one side of the table, we think it is more useful to understand the ways in which different cultural paradigms move across the spectrum between reductionist and holistic modes. Having developed this table, we are conscious of the fact that the table itself is a very reductionist way of understanding differences. On the 'holistic' side, by definition, these different modes do not exist separately. They happen simultaneously. It is precisely the ability of the healers we interviewed to integrate these different modes from moment to moment that makes them effective.
Table 1. A spectrum between reductionist and holistic modes of perceiving, interpreting, relating, and knowing.

### Table 1.1 Modes of perception

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REDUCTIONIST MODES</th>
<th>HOLISTIC MODES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Left-brained</td>
<td>Right-brained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incisive, linear, quantitative, dualistic, focused, specific, explicit</td>
<td>Intuitive, imaginative, nonlinear, diffuse, harmonizing, big-picture, pattern-based, implicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disembodied</td>
<td>Embodied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1.2 Modes of understanding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REDUCTIONIST MODES</th>
<th>HOLISTIC MODES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Symbolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational, verbal, analytic, scientific, theoretical, mechanistic, detached, detail-oriented</td>
<td>Imaginative, pictorial, mythical, narrative-based, integrative, social, emotional, metaphorical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1.3 Modes of relating to others and nature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REDUCTIONIST MODES</th>
<th>HOLISTIC MODES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separate from others and nature</td>
<td>Relational and interconnected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-serving, individualistic, egoistic</td>
<td>Service oriented, communal, based on reciprocity and mutual obligations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature lacks soul/spirit</td>
<td>Everything in nature is inspirted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature is a resource to be used by humans</td>
<td>Nature is our mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1.4 Modes of knowledge production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REDUCTIONIST MODES</th>
<th>HOLISTIC MODES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is obtained via separation and distance</td>
<td>Knowledge is obtained through identification and participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity is the only valid criteria for knowledge</td>
<td>Each subjective experience is valid grounds for knowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid knowledge is obtained through the quantitative measurement and recording of external sense perceptions</td>
<td>Knowledge is obtained by inner emotionally-based processes of empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is based on finding logical cause and effect relationships</td>
<td>Knowledge can be based on finding acausal connecting principles (synchronicity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is context independent</td>
<td>Knowledge is always situated, embedded, ecological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge proceeds by breaking down any system into its component parts to understand the relationships between them</td>
<td>Knowledge proceeds by understanding the whole system and the relationships between the parts and the whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control-oriented</td>
<td>Partnership oriented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Preconceptual experience**

Our perceptual, sense experiences comprise the foundation that we have for knowing the world around us. These experiences are pre-conceptual to the extent that they are not yet mediated by our processing of them. Our perceptions, however, are also influenced by cultural context and our interpretation of our past experiences.

When examining modes of perception, we draw from work by Iain McGilchrist (2012) on the two hemispheres of the brain (Table 1.1). He theorises that, more profoundly than just housing different brain functions, each hemisphere brings a different world into being. His basic thesis is that throughout Western cultural history one of the two hemispheres has been more or less dominant. His claim is that presently, in the West, the right hemisphere has achieved a strong dominance - that is, logical, linear, rational, instrumental, abstract, limited, egoistic thought is in control.

The learning process for Shipibo healers is focused primarily on learning from direct experience through embodied experiences with plant dietas and from dreams and visions, which occur when drinking ayahuasca. From such experiences, intuitive and/or altered states of consciousness or modes of perception can be accessed, which enable healing to be channelled.

There are also many examples in the history of Western thought and scientific breakthrough where important discoveries are acknowledged to have come from dreams and visions. Despite Descartes ushering in the age of rationalism by founding his philosophy on ‘Cogito, ego sum’, ‘I think therefore I am’ - thereafter forever pointing Western thought down a solitary and individualistic path - his whole philosophy was inspired by a series of visionary dreams (Sheldrake, 2009). Likewise, Kekulé is said to have discovered the hexagonal structure of the benzene molecule through a dream in which he saw the classic alchemical symbol of the snake with its tail in its mouth.

**Interpretation of experience**

The interpretation of our experiences is continually being constructed based on both the experiences themselves and our cultural context (Figure 3). Our understanding of reality, is therefore not an objective interpretation, but is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1999). These interpretations can be seen as the stories that we use in order to understand our experiences.

We use the work of Carl G. Jung to develop the modes of understanding section of the table (Table 1.2). His recently published personal journal, ‘The Red Book’ (Jung and Shamdasani, 2012), has shown that he, like the Shipibo healers we interviewed, was able to descend into the depths of his psyche where he encountered other autonomous, non-material beings, which served him as guides and helped him in his practice as a psychotherapist. This enabled him to understand and give due weight to other more symbolic and pictorial images found in dreams and other aspects of our psychic life.

Through immersing ourselves in a wider range of cultural paradigms, we can access different modes of understanding that enable us to interpret our experiences. We consider that it is the ability to incorporate and integrate both reductionist and holistic modes of understanding that enable us to see how minute details of an experience coalesce to form larger themes at play in our lives, which is significant for both the very different worlds of being an indigenous healer and a Western manager.

**Learning outcomes**

Based on our interviews with the healers, we identified three types of learning outcomes, or types of knowing (Figure 3):

1. Knowledge about (abstract knowledge/facts).
2. Knowing what to do.
3. Knowing how things relate.

Abstract knowledge (Table 1.4) is probably the type that we are most familiar with from Western schooling. This is knowledge about an object or an objectified reality, and therefore can be understood abstractly. It is, furthermore, the focus of most positivist science - for example, knowledge about which plants are useful for medicinal purposes, and how they are prepared.

The second two types of knowing – knowing what to do, and relational knowledge - are participatory, and are not readily passed on through writing or book learning. Knowing what to do is an embodied, or tacit type of knowledge - for example, knowing how to sing icaros, which icaros to sing and how to conduct healing.

Relational knowledge is a type of knowledge that is focused on the connections between things (Table 1.3). This type of knowledge relates to how different selves within a community or ecosystem (human and non-human) fit together and interact. For example, who is responsible to whom. These relationships are often guided by a sense of reciprocity. This type of knowledge can be useful to healers in forming a diagnosis and understanding what is needed for healing.

Holmes and Jampijinpa (2013) caution the importance of resisting turning indigenous knowledge into an abstract concept as opposed to an experiential process that is lived daily. Indigenous knowledge cannot easily be extracted and inserted into a knowledge database. Rather it is practised in every aspect of life. Similarly, in Western organisations, the creation of computer-based knowledge information systems that try to compile and harness all the knowledge in an organisation have been problematic because knowledge cannot always be codified in this way.
6. What can western managers and organisations learn from this?

In this section, we want to highlight what we see as the key points of learning from this study for Western managers. To do this, we will connect some of the key themes from our interviews with Shipibo healers with ideas in the management and organisational literature.

Holistic perspectives

We have already pointed out in the previous sections the importance of holistic methods of learning.

Ideas of experiential and holistic learning are not foreign to learning theories or methods of management development. David Kolb (1984), in particular, developed a theoretical model, which shows that experience is the fundamental basis of learning. It is well accepted that effective leaders must possess ‘emotional intelligence,’ not just superior brainpower in the form of high IQs (Goleman, 1996). More recently, studies have emphasized as well the importance of what has been called ‘spiritual intelligence’ (Zohar & Marshall, 2012; Alexander, 2014), and even ‘ecological intelligence’ (Goleman, 2009, 2010 & 2012).

In recent years, there has been a plethora of methods – often using the arts - designed to help managers develop a more holistic perspective. All these methods can be important and valuable to the degree that they help give managers a larger perspective and enable them to draw upon the wider range of abilities represented in the right hand side of Table 1 in the previous section.

Holistic perspectives enable managers to maintain a larger picture of the whole, whilst simultaneously attending to each detail. Each detail gains added significance through the extent that it embodies the whole and likewise the whole (for example an organizational strategy or vision) becomes much clearer as it is manifest in details.

Situated learning

Shipibo concepts of learning and healing are always related to the community and ecosystem that one belongs to, and often cannot be abstracted from this wider context without a loss in the efficacy and meaningfulness of the knowledge. In the case of Shipibo healers, their wider ecosystem includes its non-material dimensions as well as the ‘natural’ ecosystem within which they live.

This idea of knowledge grounded in a local ecology can be comparable to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) idea of ‘situated learning’. They say of their perspective, which is an apt summary of what emerges from the interviews with Shipibo healers that:

“There is no activity that is not situated. It implied emphasis on comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than “receiving” a body of factual knowledge about the world; on activity in and with the world; and on the view that agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute one another.”

Important individual and organisational learning arises from the everyday interactions of organisational members. It is relational and organisationally embedded, not an abstract process. We learn in organisations through participation, engagement and dialogue.

In the same way, the healers learn and enact healing through participation in the non-material worlds their training allows them to access. As Stephan Byer (2011), a leading commentator on Peruvian shamanism, has pointed out, we do not enter these other worlds as tourists. These worlds, like our ordinary social worlds, carry obligations and reciprocities. Likewise, to be skilled managers and leaders we cannot afford to be passive spectators in the organisational worlds to which we belong, but must actively engage with and contribute to the wellbeing of our various communities.

The importance of intuition

From the interviews, it is clear that the healers intuitively know what to do when going about their work of healing people. They neither make choices randomly or at whim nor do go through a conscious, rational process of considering options and then choosing which option to take. As they say, the icaros (the healing songs) come to them rather than being consciously chosen. This ability to be receptive but also to focus is the result of their long years of apprenticeship doing many plant ‘diets.’

Similarly, an effective manager or leader is always using their intuition. They are always facing novel, complex, uncertain situations. The question then arises, as Ralph Stacey (2000) puts it: how do they decide what to do in situations where they don’t know what to do? In the lived reality of daily organisational life, managers are doing this all the time - often without being explicitly aware of this.

Interestingly, in his work on intuition, the psychologist Guy Claxton (1998) comments that when entrepreneurs are asked to explain their decisions they often cannot – and that sometimes the act of explaining what they do renders them less capable. In Iain McGilchrist’s terms, it’s like asking the right side of brain to do what the left side naturally does. The challenge, then, for people charged with developing managerial ability is how to foster this integrated capacity for intuitive action, without making it so explicit and left-brained that it is rendered ineffective.

Personal discipline

One of the six key organizing themes that emerged from the interviews was the requirement for discipline to become a healer. As the interviewees repeatedly said, the path to being a healer is not easy. It requires sacrifice and dedication, and is, furthermore, fraught with risk of failure and envious attack. I’m sure many organisational leaders can identify with this.

This idea of personal discipline resonates with one of the five key disciplines that Peter Senge (1990) outlines, which are necessary to build learning organisations – personal mastery.
As Senge says, which could also be a description of the Shipibo healers:

“People with a high level of personal mastery are able to consistently realize the results that matter most deeply to them - in effect, they approach their life as an artist would approach a work of art. They do that by becoming committed to their own lifelong learning.”

Servant leadership

What emerges from the interviews with the Shipibo healers is their connection to a wider whole – in their case to their communities and ecosystems, the worlds of plant spirits and other non-material worlds. Like everybody, they need to earn a living, but their dedication to their work and to healing others goes way beyond this. Similarly, in the world of Western organisations, leaders are needed who are oriented to a sense of service far beyond their own narrow self-interests – increasingly, not just to the needs of their whole organisation, but to the wider planetary social and ecosystem in which all economic activity is embedded.

Greenleaf (2002) foresaw this need for what he called servant leadership. Twenty five years ago, he said:

“The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.”

Presence

Ultimately, what characterises the skilled healers in our interviews is their quality of embodied presence, their ability when working to be fully in the moment. Interestingly, this is not necessarily evident in their ordinary life. Many of them are very humble, often unremarkable on first impression, and they, like most Shipibos, lead simple, highly family-oriented lives. However, when they are in their ceremonial element, their presence is vast.

Drinking and working with the visionary plant brew ayahuasca is very exacting – one can spin off in all kinds of directions – and the healers have learned to concentrate and harness the abilities given to them by their different plant and spirit ‘allies’, which have been developed through their training over time, in order to heal others. Being fully present in a healing ceremony means being open to all the energies (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and other-worldly) that are present and, then, knowing how to work with these energies.

For Western managers, presence does not have to imply having huge charisma, which is often how it is understood - Bill Clinton, notably, is often said to have a huge presence. Presence, in contrast to charisma, implies being grounded in what you are doing, not letting your ego dominate either yourself or others, being receptive to situations as they unfold, understanding the underlying energetic dynamics of encounters, being able to concentrate and focus in the moment, and then, knowing what to do.
Conclusion

Rather than placing value only on how Shipibo knowledge systems can inform Western practices, our intention with this study is to bring the two worlds into a mutually beneficial dialogue.

The challenging question for young Shipibo people growing up in a culture whose traditions are being lost is how they can keep their deep-rooted cultural identities whilst still learning to navigate the Western economic, political and cultural systems that are now increasingly part of their everyday realities. We believe that it is necessary to foster a sense of value for the living culture and traditional practices both from within and outside the culture. This is a task that is made difficult by the colonialist legacy, which is still very much alive, taking on the forms of systemic racism and environmental destruction.

Because of this historical legacy, when interacting with indigenous knowledge systems, we recognize the importance of focusing on reciprocity and right relationship rather than knowledge extraction. We must remember that perhaps the true gift of indigenous knowledge is not the knowledge itself, but the quality of lived experience by which it is attained.

While still recognizing the intrinsic value of Shipibo traditional healing practices, we hope that by sharing what we have learned from these healers during our series of interviews, and by demonstrating what Shipibo perspectives can contribute to organisational leadership and learning, we can make some progress toward the revaluation of this beautiful and unique culture by a wider audience.

See Appendix Three below for links to organisations working with indigenous peoples that always need support in terms of finances or volunteers.
References


The rapidly growing spiritual tourism industry, occasioned by the influx of Westerners seeking to participate in traditional healing ceremonies, is also potentially helping to keep these indigenous healing traditions alive into the next generation.

The Shipibo are situated in this moment at a crucial confluence of actors and events. On the one hand, the Amazon rainforest is known worldwide for its natural beauty, with some of the richest biodiversity on the planet, and is recognized as playing a crucial role regulating the earth’s atmosphere. Because of this, the Amazon has been said (Lovelock, 2000) to be the “lungs of the earth.”

On the other hand, rapid deforestation is threatening Amazonian ecosystems, as well as indigenous cultures. The Shipibo dwell at the interface of colonial and indigenous worldviews and practices. Missionaries, conquistadors, and later colonists of the area brought with them mechanistic worldviews and a reductionist, scientific approach to knowledge and learning. This is in contrast to animistic worldviews and holistic learning styles that are common to many indigenous groups. Because of the nature of this intersection, the Shipibo occupy a space in which these two worldviews interpenetrate each other – one, in which the entire ecosystem is seen as inspired, and another in which it is viewed instrumentally as a resource for creating profit.

The Shipibo have a rich culture in terms of stories, legends and myths, songs, artisanal traditions (their crafts are recognized as part of the Peruvian nation’s cultural heritage), knowledge of medicinal plants and healing traditions. However, Shipibo culture is neither static nor homogeneous, and its boundaries are not cleanly defined. Although aspects of their culture are quite distinct and recognizable, there has been a lot of crossover with other indigenous cultures, as well as with Mestizo and European cultures.

In fact, the name Shipibo is shorthand for three different peoples – the Shipibo, Konibo and Shitebo - who have different cultures but share the same basic language and have become increasingly interrelated through marriage and higher levels of mobility. Because of this, there is not a unified Shipibo culture or internal organization. Instead, it can be seen as comprised of a heterogeneous set of practices and beliefs that derive from a common origin in a particular part of the Peruvian Amazon, and which have been passed down generationally.

Certain aspects of the Shipibo culture are currently gaining recognition globally, mainly through the use of plant medicines that Shipibo healers employ in their healing practices. Because of this attention, these healing practices are changing rapidly, adapting to the desires of foreigners who pay good money for access to Shipibo healing traditions (Brabec de Mori, 2014; Labate ed. 2014). The rapidly growing spiritual tourism industry, occasioned by the influx of Westerners seeking to participate in traditional healing ceremonies, is also potentially helping to keep these indigenous healing traditions alive into the next generation.

Though Shipibo communities have been in contact with outsiders for over 300 years, the past 50 years have brought an increasing wave of modernisation and deforestation, with roads creating access into this frontier area for oil prospecting and timber crews, accompanying a hundredfold increase in the population of Pucalpa (Hern, 2008). This deforestation has transformed much of the ecosystem directly surrounding Pucalpa from lush rainforest and river floodplain to nutrient-poor grassland. The Ucayali River, previously abundant with fish is now polluted and overfished commercially, and is no longer able to support Shipibo livelihoods.
Shipibo communities in the region have all interacted with the modernization process in various ways, some integrating into urban settings and livelihoods, and others retaining a more remote and rural character, largely determined by the extent of road access to the area. However, due in part to land-tenure and ecosystem change affecting traditional livelihoods, nearly all Shipibo villages are now dependent on the market money economy for certain things.

There is a lot of migration between communities along the Ucayali River, and the boundaries designating townships are not fixed, moving in response to changes in the flow of the river, or the placement of community infrastructure. Among healers, too, it is not unusual to travel to towns relatively far away in order to apprentice with a teacher. Families are often spread out geographically, and moving between communities or between rural and urban areas is common.

APPENDIX TWO: THE INTERVIEW PROCESS
Both researchers were present for each of these interviews. Two of the interviews were principally in the Shipibo language, for which a translator was necessary. The remaining interviews were mostly carried out in Spanish with translation into Shipibo at times for clarification. Interviews were recorded for accuracy, and then transcribed and translated into English at a later date. Analyses for this report were done based on the translated transcripts.

Five of these interviews were conducted with pairs of healers – an older healer and their apprentice, in three cases their son or daughter and in two cases their nephew. Three interviews were conducted just with one healer.

We chose to do the five interviews with pairs of healers together, rather than separately, as we were interested in them exploring together two aspects of their relationship. Firstly, how had the apprentice learned from their teacher, and, secondly, how did they both think that the process of learning to be a healer had changed over the generations.

Six of the healers come from the same family lineage, and 3 other lineages were also represented. Healers that we interviewed spanned from ages 41 to 86. Names of the healers have been changed to respect the privacy of our respondents, and if other healers bear the names here, it is purely coincidental.

APPENDIX THREE
NGOs working with indigenous people in the Amazon:

1. Alianza Arkana: www.alianzarkana.org
2. Amazon Watch: www.amazonwatch.org
3. Survival International: www.survivalinternational.org
The Val Hammond fund cements Roffey Park’s commitment to applied management research through expanding the diversity and reach of thinking aimed at improving the world of work. Val, formerly Roffey Park’s Chair and Chief Executive, is a keen supporter of Roffey Park’s proud tradition as a charitable research institute and is still deeply engaged in Roffey’s research work through her participation in Roffey’s research advisory group.