

SHIPIBO CURANDERISMO

A COMPLETE DEEP DIVE

Kene Vision, Icaros, Dieta, Ayahuasca, and the Song-Based Healing Tradition of the
Peruvian Amazon

The curandero does not compose the icaro.
The plant sings it to her during the dieta,
and she receives it the way an instrument receives a note —
the song was always already there.
The Shipibo see the human body as a luminous geometric pattern.
Illness is the distortion of that pattern.
The icaro is the correction.
Song is the medicine. The plant is the physician.

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Introduction

The Shipibo-Conibo people — traditionally called Shipibo (meaning 'monkey people' in their own language, Shipibo-Konibo, a Panoan language) — are an Indigenous Amazonian people of approximately 30,000-35,000 individuals living primarily along the Ucayali River and its tributaries in the Loreto, Ucayali, and Madre de Dios regions of eastern Peru. They are one of the largest surviving Indigenous groups in the Peruvian Amazon and one of the most studied by anthropologists and ethnobotanists, due primarily to their extraordinarily sophisticated healing tradition — a system that combines visionary plant medicine, sacred geometric art, and song-based healing in a way that has no precise parallel in any other tradition.

The core of Shipibo curanderismo — what makes it distinct from other Amazonian healing traditions and from healing traditions globally — is the kene system: the Shipibo perception of the human body, and indeed all living reality, as covered with specific geometric patterns that encode health and illness, connection and disruption, harmony and distortion. The curandero's work is pattern recognition and pattern correction — perceiving through trained vision the specific distortions that constitute illness and deploying the specific songs (icaros) that restore the pattern to its correct form. The plant medicines (primarily ayahuasca, called oni in Shipibo) are the medium through which both the healer's perception and the healing itself operate.

Kene

The Sacred Geometric Vision System

Kene (pronounced 'KE-neh') is the Shipibo word for their distinctive geometric design system — the specific patterns of interlocking lines, spirals, meanders, and geometric forms that appear on Shipibo textiles, ceramics, body painting, and all forms of material culture. But kene is not simply a decorative style: it is the visible form of the cosmic order itself, the specific geometric language through which the spirit world communicates with the human world, and the primary visual medium through which Shipibo healers both perceive illness and transmit healing.

KENE — THE COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING

KENE AS COSMIC PATTERN: In Shipibo cosmology, every being — human, animal, plant, and spirit — exists as a specific kene pattern. The cosmos itself has a kene. Each plant spirit has its own distinctive kene. Each human being has their own kene, which is both their spiritual identity and a direct indicator of their spiritual health condition. **KENE AS DIAGNOSTIC TOOL:** An experienced Shipibo healer (onanya) perceives the human being's kene directly — typically in visionary states induced by ayahuasca, but in the case of the most experienced healers, also in ordinary consciousness. When a person is spiritually and physically healthy, their kene is clear, symmetrical, vibrant, and luminous. When illness is present — whether physical, psychological, or spiritual — specific portions of the kene are distorted, darkened, absent, or invaded by alien patterns that don't belong. **KENE AS HEALING MEDIUM:** The icaro — the sacred healing song — works on the kene directly. The curandero sings specific patterns of sound that correspond to specific geometric corrections in the patient's kene field. The song is literally the kene being restored through acoustic vibration. This is not metaphor: Shipibo healers describe seeing the geometric patterns shift as they sing, watching the distortion resolve as the correct song moves through the field. **KENE IN TEXTILE:** The extraordinary geometric textiles produced by Shipibo women — some of the most sophisticated hand-woven designs in any tradition — are direct kene transmissions. The women receive specific kene patterns in visionary states and reproduce them in textile form. These textiles carry the kene of the plant spirits who transmitted them; wearing or being near a genuine Shipibo kene textile is understood as being in the presence of the plant spirit's healing pattern. **THE AYAHUASCA VISION:** During ayahuasca ceremony, kene patterns are often among the most prominent elements of the visual experience — flowing, interlocking geometric forms that pulse and transform. Shipibo practitioners understand this as the ayahuasca vine's own kene becoming perceptible to the human visual system.

The Dieta

The Core Training Technology of Shipibo Curanderismo

The dieta (from the Spanish 'diet,' but meaning something far more specific and far more demanding in the Shipibo context) is the primary training technology of Amazonian curanderismo — the sustained period of isolation, dietary restriction, and intimate relationship-building with a specific plant teacher through which a curandero receives the specific songs (icaros), the specific vision capabilities, and the specific spiritual power needed for healing work. The dieta is not preparation for the work; it IS the work, with the ceremonial ingestion of the plant teacher as concentrated events within a longer ongoing process.

What the Dieta Is

A dieta involves entering into a specific sustained relationship with a specific plant spirit — not just ingesting the plant but living with it, sleeping with it, dreaming with it, eating only what it allows, and progressively receiving its teachings as the relationship deepens. Different plant teachers have different dieta requirements and different teaching styles. The master healer (onanya) may have completed multiple dietas with multiple plant teachers over the course of their training, each dieta lasting weeks to months.

THE DIETA — STEP-BY-STEP

STEP 1 — CHOOSING THE PLANT TEACHER: The curandero or student begins with a specific plant — not always ayahuasca. Many dietas begin with other plants: chiric sanango (for courage and clarity), bobinsana (for heart opening), ajo sachá (for protection), noya rao (the tree of light — for advanced practitioners). The specific plant is chosen by the teacher or by the student's inner calling, confirmed by divination or by the teacher's recommendation. STEP 2 — ENTERING THE ISOLATION: The student enters a period of isolation — typically in the forest, away from the community, in a small shelter. During the dieta, contact with other people (especially sexual contact and contact with menstruating women) is strictly avoided. The isolation is not punishment; it is the specific condition that allows the plant's subtle communication to be heard without the static of ordinary social life. STEP 3 — THE DIETARY RESTRICTIONS: The dieta's specific food restrictions vary by plant but generally include: no salt (salt interrupts the plant's energetic transmission), no sugar, no alcohol, no processed foods, no pork or other fatty meats. The base diet is typically fish, plantain, and rice — simple foods that do not interfere with the plant's specific chemistry and energetic signature. STEP 4 — THE DAILY INGESTION: The plant teacher is ingested daily or at specific intervals during the dieta — sometimes as a brew, sometimes as a bath, sometimes inhaled as smoke, depending on the plant's specific form of transmission. The daily ingestion maintains the ongoing relationship rather than being a single dramatic event. STEP 5 — THE RECEIVING OF DREAMS AND VISIONS: As the dieta progresses, the plant begins to communicate through dreams, through visions during the ingestion sessions, and gradually through a more continuous awareness during ordinary consciousness. The primary transmission is the icaros — the plant's specific songs begin to arrive, first as fragments, then as complete sequences. STEP 6 — THE INTEGRATION PERIOD: After the main isolation period ends, the dieta continues in a modified form — the restrictions are gradually lifted, the student returns to community life, but the relationship with the plant teacher is maintained through specific ongoing protocols. Breaking the dieta's rules (especially consuming alcohol or having inappropriate sexual contact) during the integration period can interrupt or damage the relationship built during isolation. STEP 7 — THE COMPLETION: When the plant teacher indicates (through the quality of the communication and the fullness of the icaros received) that this dieta is complete, the student formally closes it — with specific prayers, offerings, and acknowledgment of what has been given. The icaros received during the dieta become part of the practitioner's permanent healing repertoire.

The Healer Levels

Curandero, Onanya, and Meraya

Shipibo curanderismo recognizes a clear hierarchy of healing capacity based on the number of dietas completed, the power of the plant teachers worked with, and the specific abilities developed through years of practice. This is not a bureaucratic hierarchy but a practical one — more dietas with more powerful plants produces more powerful healing capacity, which is demonstrated in practice rather than simply asserted.

THE THREE HEALER LEVELS

THE CURANDERO (GENERAL HEALER): The entry level of recognized healing practice — someone who has completed one or more dietas, has received a repertoire of icaros, and can conduct basic healing ceremony. The curandero works primarily with ayahwasca and the more accessible plant teachers. Their vision capacity is genuine but limited; they can perceive obvious kene distortions and treat common conditions. A curandero may have trained for 3-7 years before practicing independently.

THE ONANYA (MASTER HEALER — 'ONE WHO KNOWS'): The highest level of recognized healer in common practice — one who has completed multiple extended dietas with multiple powerful plant teachers, has a large and varied repertoire of icaros, and can perceive the full kene of a patient with precision. The onanya can treat complex conditions — deep trauma, spiritual attack (dano), chronic illness with spiritual roots — that are beyond the curandero's capacity. The onanya's presence during ceremony is felt by all participants; their voice when singing icaros carries a specific quality of power that practitioners consistently distinguish from less advanced healers. Training to onanya level may take 10-20 years of sustained dieta practice.

THE MERAYA (THE TRANSFORMING HEALER — ENDANGERED): The highest level of Shipibo healing capacity — a level that is now very rare and possibly close to extinction in its full form. The meraya can transform into specific animals (most commonly the boa constrictor — the primary spirit animal of Shipibo healing cosmology), can travel through the spirit world in ways that extend beyond what the onanya can do, and can treat conditions that the onanya cannot address. The meraya is the Shipibo equivalent of what other traditions call the fully realized shaman. Very few living practitioners are recognized at this level by the Shipibo community.

THE DARK PRACTITIONERS — BRUJO AND MURAYA: The same training process that produces healers can, when turned in the wrong direction, produce sorcerers. A brujo (sorcerer) uses icaros and plant spirit relationships to cause harm — sending specific harmful patterns into a person's kene. Dano (spiritual harm or sorcery) is understood as a real and present danger in Shipibo communities, and much of what healers do involves identifying and removing dano placed by sorcerers. The ethical requirement that Shipibo healing is always conducted for the patient's benefit and never for harm is the primary distinction between healer and sorcerer.

The Icaros

Sacred Songs of the Amazon — Complete Treatment

Icaros are the sacred healing songs of Amazonian curanderismo — received from the plant spirits through the dieta process, sung during ceremony to call specific spirits, to open and close the ceremonial space, to guide the participants' visionary experience, to conduct individual healings, and to protect the ceremonial container from intrusion by harmful forces. They are simultaneously the primary tool of the healer's work, the evidence of the healer's plant-spirit relationships, and the acoustic equivalent of the kene — the specific geometric pattern correction expressed through sound rather than through visual form.

How Icaros Are Received

Icaros are not composed in the ordinary sense — a curandero does not sit down and write a healing song. They are received: during extended dieta with specific plant teachers, the plants sing their songs to the practitioner in dreams, in visions, and in the specific states of consciousness that the dieta process opens. The practitioner learns the songs by receiving them from the plant. A curandero's full repertoire of icaros represents their community of plant-spirit allies — each icaro is the voice of a specific plant spirit that the healer has entered into sustained relationship with.

THE MAJOR ICARO TYPES AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

OPENING ICAROS (LLAMADAS — THE CALLINGS): Sung at the beginning of ceremony to call the specific plant spirits and protective beings who will assist the healing work. These are the threshold songs — they establish the ceremonial container and signal to the spirit world that the space is open for healing work. Different healers have different calling icaros; the specific songs reveal which spirits the healer is in relationship with. AYAHUASCA ICAROS: Songs sung directly to the ayahuasca spirit to activate the brew's specific healing capacity. The ayahuasca's action during ceremony is understood as guided by the healer's icaros — the songs shape what the ayahuasca does and where it goes in the participants' systems. PROTECTION ICAROS (ARKANA): Songs that build and maintain the protective boundary of the ceremonial space — preventing harmful spirits and harmful energies from entering. The arkana is one of the most important categories of icaro because the ceremony's healing work requires a protected container. An healer who cannot maintain the arkana cannot conduct ceremony safely. HEALING ICAROS: The specific songs directed at specific patients for specific conditions — the icaro that corrects the specific kene distortion the healer perceives. Different conditions require different icaros. The healer chooses the appropriate icaro based on their vision of the patient's kene state. The most specific and most powerful healing icaros are often the most closely held by individual healers. PURGING ICAROS: Songs that facilitate the purga — the physical expulsion that is one of the ceremony's primary healing mechanisms. These songs work with the body's own expulsion capacity to assist the release of what needs to leave. CLOSING ICAROS (DESPEDIDAS — THE FAREWELLS): Sung at the end of ceremony to formally thank and release the plant spirits and protective beings, to close the ceremonial container, and to restore ordinary consciousness and ordinary space. Closing the ceremony properly is as important as opening it — leaving the space open is a source of danger for both the healer and the participants.

The Healing Ceremony

Complete Step-by-Step

The Shipibo healing ceremony — conducted in the maloca (the large ceremonial house) after dark — is one of the most sophisticated ceremonial structures in any healing tradition. It operates simultaneously on the collective level (the group's shared visionary experience creates a specific field that amplifies the healing) and the individual level (the curandero works specifically with each participant's kene within the shared ceremonial space). The ceremony has a specific arc from opening to closing that the healer maintains through the continuous deployment of icaros.

THE HEALING CEREMONY — COMPLETE STEP-BY-STEP

PREPARATION (DAYS BEFORE): Participants observe pre-ceremony dieta restrictions — avoiding alcohol, pork, sex, and processed foods for a minimum of 3-7 days before ceremony. This preparation opens the participant's sensitivity and removes energetic interference. The curandero prepares the ayahuasca brew (if not using pre-prepared medicine) — a process that itself involves specific icaros sung over the cooking brew to activate and focus its healing capacity. The maloca is prepared — the space is cleared, specific plant materials may be used to smudge and protect the space, and the curandero conducts preliminary ceremony to open the space. **THE CEREMONY:**

STEP 1 — THE GATHERING (AFTER DARK): Ceremony begins after full dark — the specific quality of night consciousness is part of the healing technology. Participants gather in the maloca and are seated or mat-positioned in a circle or specific arrangement around the curandero. **STEP 2 — THE OPENING ICAROS:** The curandero begins singing — calling the plant spirits, the protective beings, and the specific spirit allies who will assist the work. During this opening sequence, the ceremonial space is being energetically defined and protected. **STEP 3 — THE SERVING OF THE MEDICINE:** The curandero serves the ayahuasca brew to each participant in turn — typically in a specific sequence that reflects the ceremony's intention. The curandero sings specific icaros over each cup before serving. The amount served to each participant is calibrated to that person's specific condition and purpose. **STEP 4 — THE ONSET PERIOD (30-60 MINUTES):** As the ayahuasca begins to take effect, the curandero continues singing — the opening icaros transitioning into the activation icaros that guide the medicine's initial movement through the participants' systems. **STEP 5 — THE PEAK (1-3 HOURS):** The ceremony enters its deepest phase. The curandero's work intensifies — they are simultaneously maintaining the group container and beginning to address individual participants. Their vision of the group's kene is at its clearest during this period. **STEP 6 — INDIVIDUAL HEALING SEQUENCES:** At specific moments, the curandero approaches each participant individually — singing specific icaros directly to them, sometimes blowing mapacho tobacco smoke over them (tobacco smoke is a protective and cleansing medium in Amazonian tradition), sometimes using other specific healing techniques. What the curandero sings to each person is chosen by what they perceive in that person's kene in that moment. **STEP 7 — WORKING WITH THE PURGE:** When participants purge (which is common and understood as a primary healing mechanism), the curandero may sing specific purging icaros to assist and complete the expulsion. The purge is not managed or suppressed — it is supported and honored as the medicine doing its most direct physical work. **STEP 8 — THE GRADUAL RETURN (3-5 HOURS):** The most intense phase passes and the participants begin returning toward ordinary consciousness. The curandero's icaros shift — moving from the deepest healing sequences toward the integration and protection songs that seal the healing work done during the peak. **STEP 9 — THE CLOSING SEQUENCE:** The curandero formally closes the ceremony — singing the farewell icaros that release the plant spirits and protective beings, give thanks, and seal the ceremonial space. This is a crucial step that many healers emphasize more than any other: the space must be properly closed. **STEP 10 — THE POST-CEREMONY REST:** Participants rest in the maloca until sufficiently integrated to move safely. The curandero may do brief post-ceremony check-ins but the primary work is complete. Integration continues for days after the ceremony.

Healing Trauma

The Shipibo Approach to Susto and Deep Wounding

Susto (fright sickness — from the Spanish for 'fright' but reflecting a much older Amazonian and Mesoamerican concept) is one of the primary illness categories in Shipibo curanderismo — the condition in which a traumatic shock (physical accident, sudden loss, violence, near-death experience, severe emotional disturbance) causes a portion of the soul to flee the body. The resulting condition — persistent dissociation, chronic illness, depression, anxiety, emotional numbing, difficulty engaging fully with life — is understood as soul loss, and the healing technology is soul retrieval through ceremony.

SUSTO AND SOUL RETRIEVAL — THE SHIPIBO APPROACH

THE DIAGNOSIS: The curandero identifies susto through observation of the patient's kene (the soul-loss portion shows as a specific absence or dark void in the pattern) and through the patient's history and symptoms. The specific trauma that caused the susto is often identifiable through the healer's vision. **THE HEALING TECHNOLOGY:** The curandero uses specific icaros — the songs associated with the plant spirits that govern soul retrieval — to locate the missing soul portion, negotiate its return, and reintegrate it into the patient's kene. The ayahuasca ceremony provides the specific visionary state in which both the healer and often the patient can perceive the soul-loss and participate in the retrieval. **THE PATIENT'S PARTICIPATION:** Unlike some healing traditions where the patient is passive, Shipibo healing often involves the patient's active participation in the ceremony's visionary work — they may directly encounter the source of their susto, may experience the soul-loss event from a new perspective, or may have the specific experience of returning to wholeness. This active participation is part of what makes the healing integrative rather than merely symptomatic. **MULTIPLE SESSIONS:** Serious susto — from severe trauma — may require multiple healing ceremonies. Each ceremony works another layer of the distortion. The curandero monitors the progression of the kene recovery between sessions and calibrates the next ceremony accordingly.

The Haligricity Lens

Song, Pattern, and the Sacred Body

Shipibo curanderismo offers Haligricity the most precise and most complete available ancient parallel to what the Haligrig understanding of sound, sacred intention, and the body's energetic field holds — in a tradition where the mechanism is not metaphorical but operationally explicit: the body's sacred pattern (kene) can be read by trained perception, distortions in that pattern constitute illness, and specific sacred sound (icaros) restores the pattern to its correct form.

The Icaro and the Varessence

The Haligrig Varessence and the Shipibo icaro are the most closely related sacred sound technologies in any two traditions in this library. Both understand sacred speech and song as having a direct, non-metaphorical effect on the energetic field of the speaker/singer and of those in the field. Both require specific preparation (the dieta for the curandero; the four-dimensional alignment of Feeling, Thinking, Speaking, Doing for the Haligrig practitioner) for the sound to carry its full sacred charge. Both understand the practitioner as a vehicle for sacred power rather than the source of it — the icaro comes from the plant spirit; the Varessence is charged by the divine intention moving through the practitioner. The difference is that the curandero received specific songs from specific plant teachers through specific training; the Haligrig practitioner crafts specific sacred speech from the tradition's cosmological framework. The mechanism is identical: sacred sound, precisely deployed, does something real.

The Shipibo healer sees the body as a luminous geometric pattern and sings it back into its correct form. The Haligrig practitioner understands the body as the outermost expression of the practitioner's full four-dimensional field and uses the Varessence to align that field. Both are pattern-correction technologies. Both use sound as the primary medium. Both require the practitioner to be genuinely aligned — genuinely present, genuinely prepared — for the technology to work. A curandero who enters ceremony without completing their dieta is a curandero who has no icaros to sing. A Haligrig practitioner who speaks a Varessence in misalignment is a practitioner speaking words without charge. The technology is the same. The preparation is the prerequisite. Grand Rising.

*"Nichian rao — the plants heal.
Nichian icaro — the songs heal.
The healer is the vessel through which the plants sing."*

— Shipibo curanderismo teaching principle

The kene has been on the textiles of Shipibo women for at least a thousand years — the same geometric pattern, received in vision, woven into cloth, worn as healing presence. The ayahuasca vine has been the teacher of Amazonian healers for longer than any written record covers. The dieta is not ancient history; it is ongoing. The onanya training takes twenty years and produces healers who can see what modern medicine cannot. The plants are not symbolic. The songs work. Grand Rising.

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