

BOOK REVIEW

Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon

by Stephan V. Beyer

John Harrison

California Institute of Integral Studies
San Francisco, CA, USA

The plant comes and talks to you, it teaches you to sing.

—Don Solon Tello Lozano

What would you say to the possibility of a riveting, yet thoroughly academic, nonfiction page-turner? Stephan V. Beyer's tour de force, *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon*, is nothing less! Building an inclusive bridge between a layman's accessibility and comprehensive scholarly research, Beyer has effectively embodied and integrated his intellectual understanding and knowledge with years of first-hand experiential encounters with Ayahuasca and other plant medicines of Upper Amazonia. Dr. Beyer holds a degree in law and doctorates in both psychology and religious studies, but these are obviously only *some* of his interests and talents. His eclectic background has led to stints as a university professor, trial lawyer, community builder, and wilderness guide, and it was his interest in wilderness survival that initially brought him into contact with medicinal plants and their potential. His skillful, often poetical word-phrasing lends such depth and artistry to his research results that a reader hardly knows where to look to be most impressed.

As he studied and learned more about the survival skills of indigenous people, it became apparent to Beyer that "wilderness survival includes a significant spiritual component—the maintenance of right relationships both with human persons and with the other-than-human persons who fill the indigenous world." In addition, Beyer's spiritual background and interest in Buddhism and Tibetan language shapes his connection to the transcendent and also establishes a deep recognition of the unifying bond between all sentient beings.

Beyer states that his intention in writing the monumental *Singing to the Plants* (400 pages of well-

researched information and knowledge gained from years of actual time in the Amazon Jungle), "is a result of my own need to make sense of the mestizo shamanism of the Upper Amazon, to place it in context, to understand why and how it works, to think through what it means, and what it has meant for me." So, this seminal work springs (as all good work does) from Beyer's own hunger to put together the many threads of his own story.

As the book unfolds Beyer's own tale is presented in the context of his relationship with two remarkable teacher-healers of the Upper Amazon: Dona Maria Luisa Tuesta Flores and Don Roberto Acho Jurama. Beyer stated that the purpose of this volume "is to try and understand who they are and what they do—as healers, as shamans, as dwellers in the spiritual world of the Upper Amazon, as traditional practitioners in a modern world, as innovators, as cultural syncretists, and as individuals."

It is when talking about his teachers that Beyer is most revealed as a humble and thoughtful human being. He does not engage in excessive fawning or sychophantish pedestalization, but presents them as real people with flaws and foibles, as well as remarkable reservoirs of knowledge.

Throughout the narrative Beyer informs and educates, opening doors to another world, a world he clearly respects, embraces, and even loves. He escorts us up the threshold and through this doorway describing in detail such subjects as: (1) the ayahuasca ceremony, (2) shamanic performance, (3) the shamanic landscape, (4) learning the plants, sounds, 5) phlegm and darts, (6) initiation, (7) spirits, (8) sex, (9) harming, (10) healing, and (11) vomiting, among 35 total chapters.

Beyer begins with an appreciative and loving description of his two teachers. In a particularly beautiful passage he describes the dream of Dona Maria that led to her *coronacion*, her crowning or initiation. In one illuminating and enlightening sidebar (which are liberally included throughout the book) he also explores the topic of *ayahuasqueras* (women shamans), their relative rarity, and the occasional chauvinistic reaction of some shamans who said Dona Maria should not be a healer. Dona Maria in her whimsical way dismisses these naysayers “as stupid people with no *fuerza*, or shamanic power, anyway.”

Beyer continues by looking at the interface of old superstitions regarding women during their menstrual cycle and their contact with Ayahuasca. Among some indigenous tribes a menstruating woman—or one who has recently had sex—should not participate in an Ayahuasca ceremony. Dr. Beyer quotes a Cocama shaman who says, “that for the Ayahuasca vine to grow properly, it must not be seen by a woman, especially a woman who is menstruating, or who has not slept well because she was drunk.” If these women see the Ayahuasca he says, “the plant becomes resentful and neither grows nor twines upright. It folds over and is damaged.” Thanks to the upsurge in Ayahuasca tourism, Beyer tells us that these attitudes may be slowly changing. “Female tourists who have come great distances at considerable expense to attend an Ayahuasca ceremony object strongly to being excluded because they are menstruating. There are also an increasing number of Ayahuasca retreats for women-only tourist groups, and an increasing demand for female *ayahuasqueras* to accommodate female tourists.” This helps to explain the relative paucity of *curanderas* (female healers); Beyer reports that he knows of only two.

Beyer’s encyclopedic masterpiece includes a detailed description of the the ayahuasca ceremony, where he describes point by point the essential components of the healing practices of the *curandero* (male healer) as the ingestion of ayahuasca to diagnose illness, the focus on *soplar* (breath), *chupar* (sucking), and the use of *icaros* (sacred songs) and the invocation of the spirits of the plants themselves during the healing ceremonies.

In the chapter titled, Learning the Plants Stephan Beyer goes into elegant detail, as he sensitively describes the intimate relationship required to “win their [the plants] love.” This thorough attention to detail is a consistent trait of his writing style. Beyer deconstructs the process of developing this relationship by emphasizing

the importance of *la dieta* (the restricted diet) as the key to a relationship with the plants.

To learn the plants—termed *dominar*, or mastery—means to create a relationship with the plant spirits. This is accomplished by, “taking them into the body, listening to them speak in the language of plants, and receiving their gifts of power and song.”

To win their love, to learn to sing to them *in their own language*, shamans must first show that they are strong and faithful and worthy of trust. To do this, they must go into the *monte* (the wilderness), away from other people, and follow *la dieta*, the restricted diet. After ingesting and studying their effects, apprentice shamans await “the appearance of the plant spirit in a vision or dream to be taught their uses and their songs.”

Beyer illustrates clearly that shamans have a real interactive intimacy with the plants of the jungle and this is a process of deep learning which can be instantaneous or it may be gradual, “the plants become your body and give you the power to heal; they become—through this lengthy, dreamlike, silent, sacred process—your allies. You learn the plants in plant time, not human time.”

Beyer joyfully discusses the nature of the *icaros* (the magic songs of the plants) and explains that it is only through learning the songs of the plants (taught by the plants) that the shaman can communicate and learn *the spirits of the plants* from the songs. The song may be whispered, whistled, or sung and the *icaro* is a gift from the plants to the shaman who uses the songs for healing, protection and to completely and intimately enter the world of spirits. Beyer quotes the poet Gary Snyder, saying that the “shaman gives songs to dreams, he speaks for the green of the leaf, the soil, for wild animals, and the spirits of plants and mountains.” The shaman is indeed the healer who sings.

Certainly there are a number of compelling traditions where sound (instruments, drums, humming, chanting, and singing) is the connective link between this and other realms. However, no other culture, either related or unrelated to the subject at hand, ever diverts the attention of the writer, or reader of this volume. It is Stephan Beyer’s breadth of knowledge with salient and compelling references to anthropology, ethnobotany, pharmacology, psychology, law, sociology, and various forms of magic that make this book a scintillating read. Yet, with his prodigious intellectual prowess Beyer never gets too top-heavy with empty philosophical or pretentiously lofty discourses. He returns again and

again to the body, the gritty, purging/vomiting, sucking/blowing, sometimes nasty, but *down-to-earth*, back to the roots of revelations (as it were) of the plant and animal spirits of the Upper Amazon. These powerful plant medicines can be messy with a myriad of unpredictable outcomes. He is not talking ecstasy-at-a-rave time here. This is not Amazonian amateur hour or psychedelic karaoke; this is balls-to-the-wall commitment. The author does not whitewash or sugarcoat the sometimes enigmatic and dulcet dirge of the jungle, or the occasional shaman with less than heroic intent. He acknowledges that as every plant has a particular energy or use, so do shamans come in many psychological shades, sometimes dark, sometimes light, but mostly gray; that is where the truth can often be found, in the ambiguous nature of humans.

As a psychologist I found Beyer's discussion of the Social Ambiguity of the Shaman a fascinating and honest, yet arcane revelation that shamanic powers can be used for healing *and* for harming. "People see that the shaman can heal, which means that the shaman can also kill," Beyer exclaims! In this context the shaman is neither hero nor villain, but set apart, as someone not to be trusted though someone who is needed. Beyer states, "In the Amazon, the dark and the light, killing and curing, are at once antagonistic and complementary, shamanic healers and shamanic killers represent interlocking cultural tendencies, and their battleground is the flesh of the sick, the ambiguous heart of the shaman, the valley of the soul. Thus the shaman's power is granted grudgingly by a society that both needs and fears it." As ethno-botanist Terence McKenna said, "Only psychos and shamans create their own reality!"

Beyer appears to have been wise (or lucky enough) to let the plants come into him, and though a consummate scholar and thinker, he balances this with gentle kindness and a receptive heart. His great lesson, in my view, is to stay true to his teachers Dona Maria and Don Roberto, the plants and the entire gestalt of the Upper Amazon.

My own experience as both subjective participant and relatively objective researcher with a panoply of psychedelic plant medicines from psilocybin to ibogaine to DMT has taught me that these teachers reveal multiple versions of reality: vivid, intense, paradigm-shifting, sometimes terrifying, and producing an occasional epiphany. Stephan Beyer seems to genuinely understand this and his true reverence appears to spring from the

humbling experience of having his psychic and physical butt kicked good, and hard, and often!

Beyer's gift is conveying this far ranging and voluminous material while walking a finely nuanced line between personal memoir and scholarly discourse (this line has been crossed by other authors, often with poor results). Neither a dry ethnography nor a subjective platform for Beyer, he has gone into the wilderness and returned *to tell tall tales of the jungle*. It could have been tempting for Beyer to make the story about himself and his exploits. However, in my view his objectivity serves both him and the reader quite well. I appreciate that Beyer did not over-personalize this work. Clearly transformed by his experiences, he modestly maintains a keen objectivity laced with an unmistakable understanding (from the inside out) of his subject. This understanding is best exemplified by Beyer's apparent disinterest in standing out front and center as the main protagonist in this treatise. In my view this is deliberate and reflects the deeper lessons Beyer has learned from his experiences.

He also does not answer **all** the questions nor attempt to spell out or overly define the Ayahuasca experience. In contrast, by opening this space Stephan is encouraging others to embark upon their own journeys, to seek their own answers, and ultimately to ask better questions. Beyer states that, "Ayahuasca teaches many things—what is wrong or broken in a life, what medicine to take for healing. It teaches us to see through the everyday, to see that the world is meaningful and magical; it opens the door to wonder and surprise."

As a researcher and psychologist investigating the efficacy of ibogaine in the treatment of opiate addiction, I recognize that the wisdom and mysteries of indigenous and centuries old shamanic plant medicines deserve respect. Admiration is best served by not imposing Western and hyper-linear models on these tools to make Westerners more comfortable. Beyer seems to understand on both a cellular and on a *soulular* level, that these non-Western ways of seeing, healing and being have so much to teach.

This book is about as perfect as any book (fiction or non fiction) has a right to be. Standing far above all other investigations on ayahuasca in its scope and depth, I found myself irresistibly engaged and frankly enchanted by Steve Beyer's labor of love brimming with obvious affection and respect for these plant spirits as teachers who actually seem to care for humans in return. Though verifiably academic, each page reads like a novel—with

layers upon layers of intrigue and information, and with the plants, the animals, and the teachers as finely drawn characters imbued with complexity, mystery, and wisdom. I highly recommend this book to anyone who seeks not only a thoroughly researched fount of information, but also a deep and rich source of inspiration.