ASHANINKA SPIRITUALITY AND FOREST CONSERVATION

by

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Abstract

This research was carried out in the Apiwtxa village of the Ashaninka people, located on the banks of the Amônia river, in the Amazon rainforest of Brazil, on the border with Peru. Living in one of the most biodiverse regions of the planet, this community stands out both for the strength and depth of its spirituality and for its commitment to stewardship of the environment; with a population of but 900, the Ashaninka of Apiwtxa have within the last twenty years planted more than two million trees. In this study, I analyze the connection between the traditional spiritual practices of the Ashaninka people, with the use of ayahuasca, and the propensity of this people to preserve nature, and to achieve a genuinely sustainable development, combining ancestral mandates inspired in part by mythology, with contemporary practices informed by a scientific understanding of forest ecology. As metaphysical convictions inform behavior, a space of reciprocal respect is created whereby indigenous principles mediate the connection between humans and the forest.

Indigenous peoples may well be the best guardians of the world's forests and its biodiversity; where indigenous lands are legally demarcated and secured, carbon sequestration is greater and deforestation is demonstrably less. What do they know, and how do they manage their forests? How much of their worldview, which generates sustainability and conservation, comes from a particular cosmology? What does it mean to consider plants as teachers? What is the relationship between Ashaninka spirituality and their propensity to conserve and regenerate the environment around them?

In this research, with the invaluable collaboration of Moisés Piyäko, a revered elder and shaman, I explore this relationship, its origins, precepts, and consequences. Analyzing cosmological aspects, ritualistic norms, and the application of this form of knowledge (not only linked to an ancestral past, but also pointing a way forward), I seek to show how this connection exists and is essential for the choices that this community made and makes. In this way, this study is also a tribute to the plurality of worldviews, the diversity of cultures and the richness they bring us, with its potential for exchanges and teachings.
Lay Summary

This study focuses on the relationship between culture and land stewardship, looking specifically at how the Ashaninka traditional spiritual practices with the use of ayahuasca inform their sense of the natural world. As metaphysical convictions inform behavior, a space of reciprocal respect is created where indigenous principles mediate the connection between humans and the forest. The research analyzes the relationship between the practical response of the Ashaninka of the Apiwtxa village as they revitalize their land and surrounding area today, and the ancient dictates of culture, spirituality and conviction kept alive through their spiritual-shamanic practices.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Alice Corrêa Fortes. The fieldwork reported throughout this research was covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H19-01512.
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A PDF version of a photobook, entitled Pawa, is supplementary material to this thesis. The photographic part of this research has a more personal and subjective approach to the theme discussed here.
**Glossary**

Ātawiyari – Shaman of great knowledge, in several medicines, and possessor of special powers. It corresponds to the most advanced level of shamanic knowledge.

Ayompari – Trading partnership with those outside of the local group.

Cushma – Not a word from the Ashaninka language. Traditional Ashaninka vesture, used by men and women, with differences in style.

Horowa – *Psychotria viridis* leaves, used to prepare the ayahuasca brew. It contains dimethyltryptamine (DMT).

Ishico – Limestone powder used when chewing coca leaves. Along with txamero, it potentiates the effects of the leaf.

Kamãpi – The ayahuasca brew in the Ashaninka language. The brew is made from the decoction of both the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the *Psychotria viridis* leaves.

Kamarãpi – Names the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine used on the ayahuasca brew; and is also used to refer to the decoction itself. This vine contains monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOIs), which allows the primary psychoactive compound of the ayahuasca brew, DMT, to be orally active.

Miração or miraçõese Term in Portuguese for visions induced by the ingestion of ayahuasca.

Pawa – Creator God of Ashaninka cosmology.

Patrão or patrões (in plural) – A literal translation of this Portuguese word is boss or employer. However, the term is used here to refer to the rubber barons. When the rubber exploitation declined, the term was applied to traders with whom the Ashaninka exchanged forest products for merchandise. In a broader sense, it is common for workers in different regions of Brazil to use it to qualify someone considered to be in a higher hierarchical position.

Piyarentsi – Traditional gatherings where fermented cassava drink, also known as caiçuma in Portuguese, is served. The drink itself can also be referred to as piyarentsi.

Sherepiyari – Great shaman whose primary work is with the spirit of tobacco; his study might include the use of 'tobacco syrup'.

Txamero – A specific type of vine, used when chewing coca leaves. Along with ishico, it potentiates the effects of the leaf.

Xapiri – Term for spirit in the Yanomami language.

Yãkoana – Snuff used in rituals by the Yanomami shamans with entheogenic properties. The snuff is made out of resin from the *Virola elongata* tree, and also contains DMT.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to the Ashaninka Apiwtxa community for always welcoming me with open arms and for allowing me access to their precious traditional knowledge. In particular, I would like to truly thank Moisés Piyäko for guiding me with patience, kindness, and wisdom through the mysteries and depths of the spirituality of his people and the enchanted beings of the forest. Without his invaluable contribution, such research would not have been possible.

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I sincerely thank the residents of Apiwtxa and the staff at the Yorenka Tasorentsi Center. I will not name each person because there are so many amongst them—children, young people, elders, and leaders—who for years have received me in such a loving way, and taught me a lot in their humbleness, nobility, and enormous generosity. May our friendships and partnerships endure for many more years to come...

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To the world's indigenous and traditional peoples, who continue to fight for the survival of their languages and cultures, and who carry on protecting the forests and other natural habitats of our planet, my reverence, and gratitude!
This work is dedicated to my mother, Liana, who has always supported me, at all times in my life; to my father, João, who took me to the Amazon, and showed me the wealth of the spiritual world; and to dear Carol Aguiar, who always believes in my dreams and supports me so they can come true.
"Nature cannot talk to everyone. 
She talks to the one who knows how to listen, and that is next to her. 
We, from this forest, are messengers for her defense; we are her voice."

Moisés Piyako

Figure 1  Moisés Piyako

Photo by Alice Fortes
I – Introduction

The first time I experienced the Amazon rainforest—the intense humidity touching my skin, the enormous trees, as tall as cathedrals, the vastness, the magic, and the rich biodiversity—was over fifteen years ago, in 2004. I visited the Apiwtxa village, of the Ashaninka people, and was so impressed. The way they maintained their traditional habits; the beautiful handmade cushmas men and women wear; the naturalness with which they relate to the different animals; the uniqueness of their architecture; the strength of their spiritual Kamarāpi (ayahuasca) ceremonies and powerful sacred chants; the joyful and sincere smiles they often show. I was so amazed by that first experience that, a few years later, I switched the direction of my professional life and started working in cultural and environmental projects in the Amazon, often with the APIWTXA association. It has been over ten years that this first adventure became a way of life, where keeping the forest alive and supporting the indigenous peoples, its greatest guardians, is what keeps me moving despite all adversities that might come in the way. And as the living example of the Apiwtxa community became more and more of a reference to me, I figured it was time to know more about these people, their history, practices, fights, and beliefs. Join me as I explore how and why they became the leaders they are now. With regional action and international recognition, the Apiwtxa village has a very unique path, which I hope to detail with maximum fidelity, honouring the trust I was given.
II – Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this master's degree was carried out from June to August 2019. However, my proximity to the Apiwtxa community predates this research. I inherited it from my father, who has had a longitudinal relationship with the community, partnering up in different initiatives for more than 20 years. I have worked with the APIWTXA Association on several projects, and, over time, relationships of friendship and mutual respect originated and grew. This longstanding relationship made all the difference when I decided to delve deeper into Ashaninka ancestral knowledge, studying traditional spiritual practices, in an effort to understand how they influence community decisions, notably the many projects for forest preservation and sustainable development. After some twenty visits to the village, driven by both work and personal interest, I was no longer a stranger when I came to spend this extended period of time in the community with the specific aim of understanding the theme of my research more deeply.

From personal experience and observation, I knew that the key to a successful outcome would be the collaboration of Moisés Piyâko, a revered elder and a highly respected shaman. Moisés, along with his brother Benki and the elder Arissemio, are currently the primary holders of the Ashaninka sacred knowledge in the community. But while Benki lives across the river from the closest town, around three hours downriver from the village, and dedicates himself to independent projects, Moisés lives in Apiwtxa and acts as an active wisdom keeper within the community. Arissemio is an elder living in a house a bit more secluded and with whom I always had little contact, which is why I did not think of him as a principal informant. Still, following the standard practices in anthropology, I went to the field with the intention of interviewing the five apprentices of Moisés, besides the three shamans. I knew all five apprentices well, and thus was initially somewhat surprised when all were inclined to deflect my inquiries, with a host of explanations, only some of them plausible. Finally, one of them, Wewito, who is also Moisés' brother, levelled with me. Respectfully and honestly, he revealed that there was a protocol to follow concerning their traditional spiritual knowledge, which is partly secret. He and the other apprentices were not socially empowered by the community to share this sacred wisdom that is within the domain of the primary shamans, Moisés, Benki, and Arissemio. These three are the knowledge keepers, the ones most advanced in the spiritual path of learning, and also aware of
what can and cannot be shared. The others must be deferential to the wisdom holders. Not that they do not know things, but the voice of the forest, the repository of sacred knowledge, is reserved for those who have reached a certain level of learning in their traditional spiritual path. To pursue my research objectives, I would have to go directly to the source: to those who are the masters within the inner structure of the community.

This episode revealed to me that the existent hierarchy and structure are clearer and stronger than even I had imagined. It also reinforced the value of this knowledge within the Ashaninka culture and allowed me to focus my time and energy on my relationship with Moisés. Arissemio is an elder, and was quite ill during my fieldwork, making it impossible for me to talk to him about my research. With Benki, I had to do a short version of the interview. During the period of my fieldwork, he was not in the village as he does not currently live there. He was very preoccupied, busy building the housing and common areas in the Yorenka Tasorentsí Center¹, and receiving two large groups of foreigners who went there to take a spiritual retreat with him.

Moisés lives in the village and is married to Rika, one of Arissemio’s daughters. She herself is very knowledgeable about healing plants, as well as myths, cosmology, and the traditional knowledge of her people. After the conversation with Wewito, it became clear that there was no point in asking as many people as possible. Why ask each apprentice if they themselves seek their answers from their master? In this sense, respecting the discreet way they share their ancestral wisdom and the existing reverence for those who have greater knowledge, I focused my study on direct learning from Moisés, in addition to the continuous observation of the routine and habits lived in the community.

Moisés Piyáko is the second son of the chief, Seu Antônio, with his wife, Pití. As a child, he continually had ayahuasca with his grandfather, Samuel, a recognized and respected chief and shaman. Samuel taught him how to prepare the brew and passed on much of the ancestral knowledge.

¹ The Yorenka Tasorentsí Center is a traditional healing center, with a focus on spirituality and land regeneration – more details about the Center can be found in the chapter III of this thesis, where contextualization of the contemporary reality of the Ashaninka people, and the Apiwtxa village in particular, is given.
knowledge he holds today. After the death of his grandfather, Moisés went ten years without drinking it. But then he decided, for reasons of his own, to resume spiritual practices with ayahuasca and has been on a path of continuous learning ever since, often in the company of his brother Benki.

Moisés is highly respected as a shaman and healer. His apprentices and other members of the community, participants in the Apiwtxa religious rituals, often comment on his power and wisdom, though he is very reticent about declaring himself a shaman. From his point of view, the study of ayahuasca is endless, and he is just an apprentice to Pawa, the Creator God of Ashaninka cosmology. However, wisdom keeper as he is, Moisés has a role as a spiritual guide for the community, and serves as a master for those seeking to deepen their knowledge on spirituality and traditional healing. He is also a healer, often called upon to treat those who fall ill in the village. Significantly, he is not only priest and physician, but also a leading political leader in Apiwtxa, having played a key role in the demarcation of the territory. This suggests not a personal desire for power or prestige, as much as the core Ashaninka conviction that there is direct connection between the physical body, the spiritual realm and the well being of the natural world.

It was a great honor to conduct this study guided directly by Moisés. His teachings came in spoken words, and also in deep silence, in dreams and visions, and in the simple observation of his daily life. As in the case of all great masters and mystics, his teachings take place on many levels. Here, I also serve as an instrument to assist in amplifying his voice, which serves as the continuity of an ancestral lineage. It is easier to respect what we know. So I come to help build recognition of the value and importance of the Ashaninka traditions, not only for its people but also for the other cultures and peoples that inhabit this same planet, Earth, with its fragile ecological balance and broad interconnection.

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2 Pawa is always referred to as God or Great Spirit. However, Pawa is not the only major deity in the Ashaninka cosmology. According to Moisés, the actual Creator, the Great Spirit, the ‘great command’ is Tasorentsi. At times the Ashaninka refer to Pawa and Tasorentsi as if one and the same. But as Moisés explains, the word Tasorentsi comes from the verb Tasonki, ‘to blow’; in Ashaninka cosmology, creation unfolds through transformation, through breath, just as a shaman blows over a person as a curative act of healing. “Pawa is the same as Tasorentsi,” Moisés told me, “but Tasorentsi is the power”. Tasorentsi sent Pawa to create the Earth, with the people, and everything else that exists here.
III – Context and Setting

'Ashaninka' can be translated as 'my people' or 'my relatives' in the language they speak, which is part of the Arawak ethnolinguistic family. They have also been known as Ande, Anti, Chuncho, Pilcozone, Tamba, Campari, though have mainly been referred to as Campas (or Kampas). That is an external designation which includes other Arawak (or Aruak) sub-Andean groups, such as the Matsiguenga and Nomatsiguenga, and is considered pejorative (Pimenta 2005). Nonetheless, it explains why the territory where the Apiwtxa village is located is named Kampa do Rio Amonea (Kampa of the Amonia River Indigenous Territory).

'Apiwtxa' is a term that means unity, and is deeply rooted in their culture and actions, as the Ashaninka have traditionally created and managed networks of political, commercial and war alliances. As a people geographically situated in the middle, centrally, between the Andean highlands and the Amazonian lowlands, the mountains and the jungle, the Incas and the Pano speaking people, the Ashaninka have mastered the art of negotiating collective interests. Historically their strength lay in their reputation as a powerful warrior people, known for having resisted the domination of the Inca Empire, the Spaniards, and the missionaries. They also stood up against the rubber patrões (rubber barons) and to this day, resist loggers and drug traffickers who invade their land for extraction of wood, chemical processing of cocaine, or to be used as trafficking routes.

3 I would like to acknowledge the importance of earlier bodies of research for the writing of this chapter. Anthropologist José Pimenta’s work proved invaluable in providing the historical and political background (both recent and old) mentioned here, especially within the Brazilian context and in relation to Apiwtxa, including a detailed analysis of Antonio and Pití’s engagement and marriage. His papers (consult the list of references for further details) and the Instituto Socioambiental website, featuring Ashaninka content authored by him, were invaluable sources for this chapter. Thank you. Anthropologist Margareth Mendes’ pioneering research in the Amônia river (between 1989 and 1991) was also of great value, particularly her ethnographic and historical data on the Ashaninka in Brazil. Anthropologists Gerald Weiss’ and Stefano Varese’ fieldwork, focusing on Ashaninka communities in Peru in the 1960s, helped shed light on the Peruvian context through their early ethnographic observations.
Figure 2: Kampa do Rio Amonea territory seen from above

Figure 3: Main Ashaninka territory in Peru

Figure 4: Map of the Kampa do Rio Amonea Indigenous Territory, showing its limits and bordering lands.

Source: Google Earth
Source: Weiss 1975, 230
Source: CPI-Acre
Basic ethnographic elements of Ashaninka culture

Spread over a vast territory, from the region of the upper Juruá and the Envira river in Brazil, to the watersheds of the Andes, the Ashaninka inhabit part of the basins of the Urubamba, Ene, Tambo, upper Perene, Pachitea, Pichis and upper Ucayali rivers and the Montaña and Gran Pajonal regions. There is no consensus on the exact number of the population as they are itinerant people with strong migration patterns. Official sources vary considerably from fifty to a hundred thousand. Most Ashaninka live in Peru, but some 2,000, perhaps as many as 2500, reside in Brazil, on five discontinuous indigenous lands, all of them in the Upper Juruá region\(^4\). Among these are the 800-1000 men and women of Apiwtxa, which is located in the indigenous territory of Kampa do Rio Amonea.

The geography of the Ashaninka homeland is mountainous and covered by forest, as it spreads between the eastern side of the Andes’ base and the lowland plains of the Amazon forest, with the climate being subtropical or tropical, depending on the precise position and altitude. Mainly located in a region known as the Peruvian Selva Central, mountain ridges are common, and rivers can be difficult and dangerous to navigate as the terrain is not flat compared to areas of the Amazon basin. While the Gran Pajonal region is located 1500-2000 meters above sea level, elevations between the Ene and Urubamba rivers occasionally exceed 3500 meters (Weiss 1975, 230). In the municipality of Marechal Thaumaturgo, where the Apiwtxa village is located, the elevation is roughly 250 meters. Although the climate is typically hot and humid (characteristic of tropical forests), with rains throughout the year, the months between May to September are considered the dry season (locally known as the summertime, in contrast to the rest of Brazil), with its peak in July and August.

The Ashaninka people are a proud people with strong ties to their culture; they are confident, brave, self-reliant, sincere, astute, kind, good-natured, respectful, reserved yet joyful, good-humored and curious. They value courage, integrity, truthfulness, beauty, and generosity. Infused with a warrior ethos, known as master bowmen, they value freedom above all other

\(^4\) The Juruá river starts in Peru and flows through Acre state, in Brazil, all the way to the Solimões river, already in the Amazonas state. We understand upper Juruá region by the basin that runs between Peru’s border and the city of Cruzeiro do Sul.
virtues and conditions. As the Franciscan priest, Manuel de Biedma, asserted before being executed by the 'Kampa' Indians in 1686, "they have an acute awareness of their personal freedom and die to defend it" (Carneiro da Cunha 1992, 206).

The nuclear family, consisting of husband, wife, and their unmarried sons and daughters is the base of the social and economic fabric of the Ashaninka. Each of these social entities is self-sufficient and independent from an economic viewpoint, with a house and food garden of their own. Their kinship type is Iroquois, or Dravidian, with an ideal marriage occurring between cross cousins (Mendes 1991, 30, 33). In the past, polygyny associated with prestigious men was common, though there is no indication that this occurs today in Apiwtxa. Nonetheless, Antonio’s (the current chief of Apiwtxa) father was married to two sisters, and his grandfather had five wives. Both enjoyed considerable notoriety and prestige as shamans and warriors. There is no fixed rule of residence, but after marriage, it will customarily be uxorilocal, with bride-service to the father in law the expectation. After such period, residence can be virilocal, neolocal, or uxorilocal. There are no tendencies to bloodlines or clans. Traditionally, there is no wedding ceremony and divorce is accepted.

Their pattern of social organization has an emphasis on the local group, without a central power, and with a marked degree of dispersion and mobility. Local groups are usually composed of one to six nuclear families, connected by kinship and there may or may not be a chief. When there is one, the political influence usually extends further (Mendes 1991, 25). Mendes contends that a political territory is comprised of local groups pulled together around an older man of prestige and influence – the chief, kuraka, or pinkatsari. Desirable qualities for a chief include courage and success in battle; being adroit at establishing trade networks with outside groups; and being a shaman and traditional knowledge holder with healing powers, as well as an adept hunter. Today, the leader acts as a liaison between regional and national society, and having access to manufactured goods is key. In a similar vein, the chief is also tasked with making decisions that concern economic activities; spearheading the defense of the

5 It should be mentioned that current land tenure systems have partially changed those patterns, though migration between Ashaninka territories is still frequent.
territory; resolving local conflicts; and (formerly) organizing and carrying out war attack campaigns.

To this day, the gender-specific division of labor is prevalent, taking the following form:

the men do all the hunting, most of the fishing, and some gathering; they clear and plant the gardens; they build the houses and manufacture all artifacts made with a knife or other cutting tool, such as bows and arrows, canoes, rafts, gourd utensils, and combs; the women do the daily harvesting and cooking, the spinning and weaving, make the pottery, baskets, and mats, and care for the children. (Weiss 1975, 240).

In Apiwtxa rafts are no longer used, though dugout canoes are still common. The community mostly travel in aluminium or wooden boats fitted with an outboard motor (dinghy style); the wooden ones being usually commissioned and carved by artisanal craftsmen in town. Pottery has mainly fallen into disuse, as it has been substituted by aluminium pots and pans.

Life in the village

Typically elevated on stilts about one to two meters above the ground, characteristic houses feature a thatch roof, and timber structure. Houses are designed with communal living in mind; hence their open design with ample room and no walls. Traditionally, kitchens are not conjoined with the main structure, but rather separate and feature space for the fire. Major changes have been afoot, however, in the design of houses and in other areas. An example of such changes is the construction of bedrooms by erecting walls, alluding to a newly found desire for privacy. In a similar vein, an increasing number of appliances, such as gas stoves (first observed during a visit in 2013, it has multiplied since), basic washing machines, occasionally a TV and stereo system, can be found in the village, especially in the leader’s houses. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that this is not the rule, and most houses don’t possess any appliances. Electricity still doesn’t reach the community, and such appliances are connected to energy generators fed by gasoline, a rather expensive and valued commodity. Generally, in recent days, electricity is provided almost every evening for around two or three hours for the houses connected to it. Mobile phones have become more and more common – even though
the village does not receive any cell phone signal. However, there are two wi-fi spots in the community: one at the school, and another by the cooperative’s office. The signal is extremely volatile though, and usually very slow. Similar to peers in their age group elsewhere, teenagers and young adults are no strangers to modern telecommunication, mainly involving the use of social media, like Facebook and Instagram.

An Internet connection has existed in the community since 2004, made possible through satellite signal and solar power. Back then, the community was facing many invasions and timber extraction from illegal loggers accessing their territory from the Peruvian side. The internet was a much needed tool to communicate with the outside world and get the government's support on protecting the border. To this day, the internet continues to play a major role in their communications; it is, in fact, the only way to reach anyone outside of the village as phone signals don’t reach their land. Like the internet, electricity is a double-edged sword, and good practices are encouraged in order to keep the cultural habits that invigorate the Ashaninka values. For instance, there is no fridge in any of the houses, and so the habit of sharing game meat ensuing a successful hunt is alive and esteemed, fostering generosity and a communal sense of living. Generators can compete with the ancestral habit of chewing coca leaves in silence at night. However, hitherto, spiritual practices like ayahuasca rituals and traditional coca leaf contemplation are still strong in the community, as they are deeply rooted in the culture and relate back to their ancestors and cosmology.

The Ashaninka's subsistence is based on agriculture, hunting, fishing, and gathering. Essential staple plants that are cultivated entail cassava, banana, plantain, corn, papaya, coca, cotton, and annatto. Equally, kale, lemon-grass, and some medicinal herbs are usually planted in a close proximity to their dwellings. Located within an agroforestry system, Apiwtxa has various fruits such as coconut, açaí berry, pupunha, lemon, cashew, and others within arm’s reach of every community member. Many families in the village also raise chickens. Hunting takes place mainly during the rainy season, and being a skilled hunter is highly esteemed. Amongst common prey are deer, paca rodent, wild pig, monkey, tapir, big birds, and tortoise. Fishing by contrast is a year-round activity, though more intensely practiced during the dry season, when water levels are low, making it easier for fish to be caught. During the rainy season, fishing takes place
mainly in lakes. In stark contrast to hunting, it is not exclusionary and is practiced by all members of the community, involving men, women, and children alike. Various fishing techniques, including the use of nets, fishing rods, spearing, and also plant poisons, are used interchangeably. Due to convenience and yield, however, the use of nets has been widely adopted amongst the Ashaninka. In the summertime (during the dry months), multi-day fishing excursions are a favourite activity. Fish are usually cooked, grilled, fried, or roasted in banana leaves, or in tabocas (a type of bamboo). Similarly to fishing, foraging for fruits, nuts, and eggs of river turtles is practiced by all. Apart from eatables, they also collect other products such as ishico (a limestone powder) and txamero (a type of vine) that are used to release the active chemicals in coca leaves; the ingredients of ayahuasca; diverse kinds of seeds; vanilla; and specific tree barks used for dyeing fabrics.

Besides relying on all that the forest provides, Apiwtxa has diversified its income-generating activities, allowing the community to acquire industrial and processed goods, such as gasoline, salt, cooking oil, and batteries, to name a few. A small number of jobs are offered by the government either at the community’s school, or as agroforestry professional or healthcare assistant. These opportunities are few, relative to the size of the population, and most families receive monthly financial aid (Bolsa Familia) from the federal government. The community association (APIWTXA), currently headed by the chief’s son, Wewito Piyäko, can be a further source of work and remuneration, but work availability is volatile as it is contingent on the projects that are developed at each point in time, and usually last for no more than two years. Creating and securing funding for new projects is probably the most contemporary manifestation of the Ashaninka ancestral art of ayompari, which designates a trading partnership with those outside of the local group. Such kind of bartering relationships have always assumed a major importance within the Ashaninka culture and their way of living, something that perseveres to this day. Other opportunities for income are to be found at the village’s cooperative (Ayompari) where artisanal goods can be exchanged for manufactured ones.

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6 Recently, Benki Piyško has started cultivating both the vine and the leave used in the Ashaninka brew, as demand has been surging, especially as the increase in popularity of this plant medicine has led to a high influx of foreigners looking for spiritual diets.
Goods produced by the Ashaninka tend to be either utilitarian or meant for trade. Such artifacts can be generally divided into four categories, based on functionality: household and work equipment; clothing, adornments, and objects for personal use; musical instruments; weapons (Mendes 1991, 64). After centuries of contact with non-indigenous people (dating back to the Spaniards), manufactured goods have been introduced and incorporated into their routines. However, traditional manufacturing processes and the artisanal use of materials remain vital and viable. Insertion rather than replacement proves to be the rule, and in some cases, adaptations, combining the merits of practicality with tradition, are found. Fabrics for women’s clothes, and the cotton for men's cushmas (ancient vesture) are examples of this. In the former, the fabric is bought, but the design and graphic patterns are traditional, including the techniques used to make the drawings, using pitsithari, a specific mud. In the latter, the thread may have been purchased, but the remainder of the process encompassing the design and weaving of the fabric remain unchanged. The ancestral ways, producing the cotton from the plant and dyeing it with natural tinting made of patsitaki (Murici) bark is still very common.

Household and work equipment produced by the Ashaninka include baskets, sieves, and the instruments used for weaving. As a proud people that appreciate beauty, clothing, adornments, and objects for personal use abound. The cushmas (both men's and women's) are iconic, distinguishing them from all the other indigenous peoples of the region. Women might also wear handmade slings, to help carry a baby, or just as an adornment. Bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and sticks to hold the hair can be made with seeds or beads, and feathers. The most salient of men's ornaments is amatherentsi, the crown – made of palm fiber with black cotton embroidered motifs, and between one and three long macaw feathers pointing upwards. The top is opened, and it is considered an object of power. It is not used on an everyday basis, but rather in special occasions. Another prominent masculine adornment is the txoshki – big kind of necklaces made of seeds, with or without feathers, that are used across the body, on top of the cushmas, in diagonal. Often two are used together, one on each side. Men also wear a satchel, woven by women. The satchel customarily contains a handcrafted pipe, carved from wood with a hollow bone stem; tobacco; coca leaves (along with ishico and txamero); and água-de-florida. All of these are used in ritualistic setting, as well as in everyday life. Just like the tobacco is sacred, so is the pipe that holds it. With a similar dexterity, the Ashaninka men also craft instruments.
such as flute and drums. The latter are characterised by having leather stretched over both sides of the wooden, hollow vessel with fiber strings used to tune them. Though riffsles gain increasing prevalence, the Ashaninka craftsmanship can also be observed in the manufacturing of bow and arrows; the use of which they still master.

The pinnacle of social life in the village are the *piyarentsi* nights, traditional gatherings where fermented cassava drink, also known as *caïçuma*, is served. While there is *caïçuma*, there will be drinking, dancing, chatting, and laughing—and that can sometimes last for days, as people will migrate from one house to another as the drink runs out. But *piyarentsi* is more than just carousing, it also holds political importance as a place of encounter, confraternization, and discussion.

In terms of religious organization, the shamans are the main agents. Highly respected, and eventually feared, they hold the key to communicating with the world of the spirits. Their authority is established through rigorous initiation rites and diets, giving them mastery over the use of sacred plants such as ayahuasca, tobacco, coca, and diverse *iwenky* (other power plants and roots). The shamans are also the holders of cosmological knowledge and possess the ability to heal. We will get into further depth about Ashaninka spiritual practices later on in this work.

**History in Peru**

Archeological research indicates Ashaninka presence in South America for over 4,000 years (Lessin 2011, 43). Trade relations between the Incas and the lowland peoples existed long before the Spanish conquest. Animals, skins, feathers, wood, cotton, medicinal plants, and honey were exchanged for cloth, wool, and metal objects such as silver and gold jewelry, and machetes. Political alliances and kinship links were also part of the trading relations. However, times of war interspersed with peacetimes, as the Inca empire repeatedly tried to conquer the forest. During wartime, the trade networks of the lowlands were called upon as allies. Besides their strategic location (in-between), with the hills of *Cerro de la Sal* (located in the Peruvian *Selva Central* region, 7 km north of the town of Villa Rica), the Ashaninka had control over the
most important product of the Amazon trade: salt. Not only it can flavour the food, but it also has the ability to conserve it (Pimenta 2005).

The first significant contact between Spaniards and the Ashaninka occurred in 1635. Franciscan friar Jeronimo Jiménez established two missions on the western extension of the Ashaninka territory. By 1742, missionaries had established missions throughout their land. A traditional settlement pattern was one of dispersion, but the missions established a more fixed settlement, as well as a prohibition of polygyny. Such cultural impositions were not well received. When, in 1742, a self-declared Inca Indian, called Juan Santos Atahualpa, led an indigenous insurrection against the Spaniards, the Ashaninka joined the revolt and within a few years, no Spaniard or Franciscan missionary could be found in the area, as they were all killed, or fled. For decades after the uprising, the Peruvian Selva Central was under the control of the Indians, who were free and autonomous. But in 1847, there was a new successful military invasion. By the end of the 19th century, the Cerro de la Sal was controlled by Peruvians and the Ashaninka had lost their most important trading product. Such loss meant economic dependence, and soon after came the violent and devastating caucho boom.

Rubber exploitation began in the 1870s and affected first the Ashaninka in the upper Ucayali region. The rubber boom was a tragedy for the indigenous peoples not only in Peru, but also in Brazil. Everywhere they were enslaved or put into very precarious working conditions. At the base of the rubber economy, in the forest, money in itself did not circulate. It served only as an abstraction, designating levels of debt of the indigenous workers towards the ‘rubber barons’, who claimed control over extensive areas, including the traditional territories of the forest peoples. A difference between Peru and Brazil was the tree used to collect the latex: in Peru, it was the Caucho (Castilloa elastica), and in Brazil, the Seringa (Hevea brasiliensis). Caucho extraction required the felling of the tree, and therefore, continuous displacement when the area was exhausted. Seringa could be ‘bled’ several times, without the need to cut it down. Both systems meant the decimation of several native populations. Some Ashaninka started collecting for the patrões, or even raiding interior settlements and selling individuals in exchange for fire weapons and metal cutting tools. The chaos and torment of the rubber era led many Ashaninka in the late 19th century to seek refuge in the lowlands, deep in the forests of Brazil.
Ashaninka communities in Brazil today, including Apiwtxa, most likely date to this era of escape and migration that brought the people out of the Andean foothills and into the forest.

**History in Brazil**

On what is now the Brazilian side of the border\(^7\), around the upper Juruá region, there are no archeological records, but travelers' and chroniclers' reports accounted the presence of the ‘Kampa’ already at the end of the 17\(^{th}\) century (Pimenta 2005). A long hiatus of records followed, until the rubber boom started (its peak was between 1890 and 1912) and the Acre state received a heavy influx of migrants from other parts of the country, mainly the northeast region – all looking for the Amazon’s ‘white gold’. On the Amônia river, there was no Seringas on the mid and upper parts of the river, which meant that the Ashaninka living there participated in the rubber economy by supplying the rubber estates with products such as meat and skins; as well as protecting it. The *patrões* knew how to take advantage of traditional disputes, and armed the Ashaninka—famous warriors—and other indigenous peoples, so they would expel or kill the Amahuaca (also known locally as ‘*índios brabos*’), living in the interior of the forest. Regular incidents of pillaging and violent run-ins with rubber tappers made them a real nuisance for the local rubber business. Such armed expeditions are known as ‘*correrias*’ (from the verb to run) and are a very violent chapter of the rubber boom, that enslaved and killed so many Indians. With the rubber economy eventually in crisis, the demand shifted to logging, and the local dynamic in the upper Juruá region changed.

**Regional political context and the fight for the land**

By the 1970s, Brazil was under a military dictatorship, and the politics for the Amazon region was influenced by the idea of the 'Brasil Grande' (Great Brazil), which implied the continuous conquering of the continental interior part of the country. 'Integrar *para não entregar*' (integrate not to give in) was a slogan that communicates very well the kind of thinking of the military

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\(^7\) The Amônia river, for instance, was not yet Brazilian until the first years of the 20\(^{th}\) century. The border litigation between Brazil and Peru was only resolved with the signing of the Rio de Janeiro treaty, in 1909.
government (such discourse remains very much alive today, under president Jair Bolsonaro's administration). The idea was to integrate, both physically, through the construction of roads, and economically, with the expansion of the agricultural lands into forest areas. On the ground, such plan meant the destruction of the environment, the ethnocide of many indigenous peoples, and a flux of new settlers, coming mainly from the south of Brazil. In Acre state, such policy was encouraged by the state government, and the settlers were known as 'paulistas' by the local people. The 'paulistas' bought many rubber estates by a bargain in order to transform them into cattle ranches. The new settlers were coming to ‘develop’ the region, and bring civilization and prosperity. However, land conflicts made Acre state notorious as one of Brazil's most violent regions back in the 1970s and 1980s.

By the mid-1980s, such a scenario encouraged the creation of the first indigenous associations, and rural workers' unions, and also led to the rise of a new alliance between indigenous peoples and rubber tappers. On May 12, 1989, the Aliança dos Povos da Floresta (Forest Peoples Alliance) was officially launched, ushering in a new era of fight for rights and lands. The demarcation of several indigenous territories, as well as the very first extractive reserves, and some conservation areas, all mainly in the upper Juruá region (one of the most biodiverse regions of the world), are all fruit of this unique alliance between the indigenous peoples, rubber tappers, and environmentalists. The 'Forest Peoples' emblem was the ecology.

Along the Amônia river, with the collapse of the rubber economy, from the 1950s or 1960s (exact dates are unknown), part of the non-indigenous population started to move up the river looking for better hunting, fishing, and logging opportunities. Migration towards the indigenous lands became more frequent in the ‘70s and ‘80s, as wood became the most important product of the region. Cutting wood for trade was not unknown to the Ashaninka, who, since the beginning of the 20th century, had traded hardwood (mainly Cedar and Mahogany), as well as meat and skin, for different merchandises. However, never with the same volume as the non-indigenous people did.

The Amônia river was so rich in hardwood that it became known as the 'river of wood'. But by the ‘80s, a process of mechanized extraction and clear-cutting took place and affected more
than a quarter of the Ashaninka territory, causing huge environmental damage, and affecting the Indians’ social organization and cultural reproduction (Pimenta 2007). There were three main incursions: in 1981, 1985, and 1987, that opened up 80 kilometers of logging roads inside the forest. Though different enterprises were involved, the main one was Marmude Cameli Limitada\textsuperscript{8}, that was responsible for extracting an estimated 300 to 400 hardwood logs per week from the territory. These times are remembered by the Apiwtxa community as a time of suffering and hunger. Nonetheless, such terrible times incited the Ashaninka to organize themselves and fight for their rights and specifically for their right to land. In the mid-1980s, Funai (the Brazilian federal institution for Indigenous affairs) arrived in Apiwtxa, providing information and generating political awareness. By the end of the ‘80s and the beginning of the ‘90s, the level of conflict with squatters was at its peak, with invasions and threats. In 1990, letters were sent from the community to authorities, and in 1991, chief Antônio Piyáko and his son Moisés went to the capital, Brasilia, to pressure Funai on moving forward with the process of demarcation of their land. The demarcation happened in June 1992, and the ratification in November of that same year. The Kampa do Rio Amonea Indigenous Territory has 87,205 hectares. Its borders are (mainly) Peru on the upper part of the Amônia River, and in the Western and Southern frontiers; Arara do Rio Amônia Indigenous Territory (still on the process of demarcation) on the lower part of the Amônia river; and the Alto Juruá Extractive Reserve, on its Eastern border.

\textbf{The Ashaninka presence in the Amônia river}

The caucho boom, latex collection, and the violence that came with it, highly influenced the migration of indigenous peoples between Peru and Brazil. However, it is important to also point

\textsuperscript{8} Marmude Cameli Limitada is owned by the powerful Cameli family. Orleir Cameli was the governor of Acre’s state from 1995 to 1999, and his nephew, Gladson Cameli, is the current governor (2019-2022). A legal dispute between the Kampa do Rio Amônia’s ashnikas and the company started back in 1996 and has come to a conclusion on April 1, 2020 through a settlement between the parts, where the Apiwtxa community will receive a compensation of R$ 14 million (nearly US$ 3 million) and an official apology, without which the Ashaninka refused to accept the agreement. “In the face of all the facts narrated and discussed at length for years in the Courts, (the logging companies) formally extend an official apology to the Ashaninka Community of the Amônia River for all the ills caused, respectfully recognizing the enormous importance of the Ashaninka people as guardians of the forest, dutiful in the preservation of the environment and in the conservation and dissemination of their customs and culture,” the settlement states.
how mobility is a common behaviour for native populations in the Amazon, and particularly between the Ashaninka people, who cherish the idea of freedom. In his research, José Pimenta states that the indigenous narratives consider pioneer families who used the Amônia river’s basin as an area of hunting, fishing, and gathering as the first migrants to the area. And he complements: “The Indians of the Amônia river claim that Kentsironki, father of Kamerentsi, the latter also known by the nickname Tenente, was the first Ashaninka to reside permanently in the Amônia river. Kentsironki would have come from the Sheshea river, a tributary of the Ucayali, at the end of the 19th century” (Pimenta 2018, 203). Even though down by the mouth of the Amônia, non-indigenous people were already collecting rubber, upriver, where both Caucho and Seringa were not found, the area was uninhabited. Only a few other indigenous peoples were reported to have occupied the Amônia basin back then. Particularly to the Ashaninka, the Amônia area was also of geographical importance, as it could connect the Juruá and the Ucayali basins (through forest trails and the Tamaya and Sheshea rivers). So, it eventually evolved from a place of temporary stay into a place of residence.

According to Chief Antônio Piyãko, and his wife Piti, the Piyãko family (current leadership of the Apiwtxa village) arrived in the region at the turn of the 20th century. As they recounted in a long interview, the Ashaninka in Peru had been enslaved by Caucho barons, for the purpose of exploiting rubber and cotton. They were obligated to work day and night without getting much remuneration. The working relationship was based on violence, where patrões had private guards at their command. They also had alembics, where they produced cachaca (sugarcane liquor), that was dispensed to the Indians to keep them obedient through intoxication. Apart from causing a plethora of social problems, it also inhibited their pursuit of spiritual practices. Back then, the Ashaninka hunted with bow and arrow, as they did not receive firearms from their explorers, only machetes.

In the 1930s, or early 1940s (the precise date is unknown), Samuel (the father of the current chief of the village, Antônio) and his father-in-law Agostinho decided to migrate in search of better living and working conditions. They embarked on a journey, leaving their families in Peru, in the region of the Tambo River, while looking for a place to settle. They started by Vacapisté and Dourado, in Peru, and went down to Juruá, already in Brazil. By the Breu river, they found
patrão Thaumaturgo Ferreira. They also tried the Envira River, before going up the Amônia River, which was alleged to be secluded and peaceful. Eventually, they returned to Peru to get their families and made the same journey to Breu, where they settled for a while. There they began to negotiate with local patrões, such as Thaumaturgo Ferreira, with whom they exchanged rubber, leather, and other products from the forest for salt, soap, men’s clothing for work, fabric for women’s cushmas, kerosene for lamps, and lead for ammunition. Making use of their skills as hunters and warriors, and partly due to the old dispute between the Ashaninka and the peoples of the Pano language, they started also negotiating with Julio Peres, a well-known Peruvian patrão, who was located above Breu, near Tipisco. He took the Amahuaca women and children to sell in Peru. These Indians were exchanged with the Ashaninka for firearms.

In Brazil, the patrões did not enslave them, so they decided to stay there. However, in the Breu river, there were already many Indians. Amônia, on the other hand, was still isolated, and they decided to migrate there. At that time, there were two Ashaninka families at the river’s headwaters, in Peru, by the Tuturutango and the Aya streams. So they decided to settle further down, at the height of the Cachoeira stream, where there were good hunting grounds, and food abounded. There, where they stayed for around four years, chief Antônio Piyakö was born. From there they moved to the Bandeira stream, for about two years, and then they went up to Revoltoso stream, where they stayed for approximately five years.

At this time, they negotiated with traders like Odon do Vale, Chico Mariano, and Chico Major. In addition to leather and meat, they now also exchanged hardwood, which was easy to find and access by the river. From Revoltoso, they migrated to the Amoninha stream, where they settled for about fifteen years. Then they went to Praia do Mulateiro, where they stayed for another long period, around twelve years. It was in this place that Samuel died. Their next migration was back to Amoninha's mouth, where they lived for about fifteen years. To this day, some Apiwtxa families live there. During all this time, they continued to trade wood and other forest products, but by then to other patrões, until the 1980s, when the first anthropologists

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9 Not related to Marshal Thaumaturgo, the name giver to the municipality where the Apiwtxa village is located.
and Funai representatives arrived, and things started to change. The concepts of indigenous territory and rights were explained for the first time. In 1992, as mentioned, the Kampa do Rio Amonea Indigenous Territory was demarcated. In 1995, to help control invasions from the neighbors below, they migrated to the Brazilian limits of the land. In the 2000s, Peruvian loggers began to invade their land in other areas, and this is still a threat today, which the Ashaninka continue to fight against with protection and surveillance initiatives.

An unusual marriage and the shaping of new leaders

Among the Ashaninka living along the Amônia river is a powerful political nexus, forged by the marriage of two very powerful local figures, Antônio Piyãko (current chief of the Apiwtxa village) and Francisca Oliveira da Silva, best known as Pití (a local white woman). Their union was, first of all, atypical, as it challenged the social conventions that guide Brazilians not only in the region, but throughout the country. It is in our historical understanding as people that miscegenation is one of our main traits and the base of our culture. However, such miscegenation is mostly understood in the form of white men marrying indigenous women (often stolen from their families), and relating to black slave women. The other way around is much rarer and often seen with suspicion. Nonetheless, Antônio and Pití fell in love and defied the norms of local society.

Piti’s family was one of the first to migrate up the river, after the rubber economy languished. At the beginning of the 1960s, her parents (both descendants of ‘rubber migrants’ who came from the northeast of Brazil decades earlier) moved to a site by the mouth of the Amoninha stream, very close to where Samuel Piyãko and his family used to live. At that time, Pití was a teenager. Chico Coló, her father, and Samuel, Antônio’s father, had known each other for over ten years and had a good relationship, having worked together for a local patrão. With time, they became friends and called each other 'compadre', which has, in the region, a very special connotation of friendship and trust. The kids started playing together and within a few years, Pití and Antonio started dating in secret. Her mother eventually found out and was enraged; she did not want her own daughter dating a ‘dirty Indian’, as she would prejudicially refer to them, like most people in the region. Still, the marriage proposal came in 1965. Although Piti's
mother did not approve, the wedding happened on January 19, 1967, in two settings: the civil registry and the Catholic church (a request from the bride).

Many Ashaninka see this marriage as a deliberate political strategy of Samuel; a way to build new alliances with the local white people. Whether he had this intention or not, there is no doubt that with Pití as part of the family, they attained significant leverage. Pití would have and exercise great local influence as events unfolded and the community and the land came under siege.

In the mid-1980s, at the height of timber exploitation, Pití was a barrier to the enslavement of the Indians, revolting against all forms of arbitrariness and discrimination. She played a key role in mediating inter-ethnic conflicts on the Amônia and even opposed members of her own family who worked as labor for the timber patrões and occupied the Ashaninka territory. (...) Tireless mediator, she was a key player in persuading members of her family of origin of the need to leave the indigenous territory. Without ever taking the lead on the political scene, she worked a lot behind the scenes, advising and guiding her father-in-law, her husband and their older children on the best attitude to adopt in relations with Funai and the whites of the region. (Pimenta 2018, 221)

Furthermore, she offered Antônio (and her children) privileged access and understanding of the non-indigenous peoples of the region, as well as teaching him some Portuguese. Together, such assets helped him develop qualities that became strategic in his ability to provide merchandise to the community and negotiate with the non-indigenous local population. All this combined to help him firmly establish himself as the leader of the local Ashaninka, after his father, Samuel, passed away in the late-1980s. Significantly, Antônio and Pití’s children (in total they had five sons and two daughters) became fluent in Portuguese and learned to read, write, and count. They also had privileged access to non-indigenous society, as they kept in touch with their relatives on their mother’s side. Such distinguished qualities make them stand out in the community, and they are naturally becoming the main leaders of Apiwtxa, as they are in charge of both the community’s association (APIWTXA) and cooperative (Ayompari). However, communal assemblies are held often, emphasizing the importance of the collective in decision-making.
It is noteworthy to mention how three of Piti’s sons have held (or still do) political positions. Francisco, Benki, and Isaac were the municipal secretary of environment and tourism at Marechal Thaumaturgo, from 2001-2003, 2003-2006, and 2006-2008, respectively. Francisco was Acre’s indigenous affairs advisor from 2003 to 2010, and Isaac became the very first indigenous mayor of Acre state. He won the election in 2016, was reelected in 2020 and is the current mayor of Marechal Thaumaturgo. Benki has received the National Prize for the Defense of Human Rights by the Brazilian government in 2004; in 2006, he was recognized as a social entrepreneur by the Ashoka Organization; at Rio+20, in 2012, he was awarded the e-brigaders Award from the e-Institute and UNESCO; and in 2013, received the Weimar City Human Rights Award in Germany, for his commitment to the rights of the Ashaninka people and surrounding communities. Benki is also a frequent guest at events on the United Nations, both in Geneva and New York City.

**International recognition, local influence, and new alliances with non-indigenous partners**

The Ashaninka of the Apiwtxa village are recognized, both for the strength and depth of their spirituality, manifested in particular by the use of Kamarãpi (ayahuasca), and by their commitment to preserving the environment. When the Kampa do Rio Amonea territory was demarcated, part of it had been devastated by cattle ranching and timber extraction. Currently, the whole village is situated within an agroforestry system and several projects of recovery of fauna and flora are being developed. Collectively, Apiwtxa has, through its many projects, planted more than 2 million trees; the ultimate goal of Benki Piyâko, a political and spiritual leader of the community is to plant yet another ten million. The Ashaninka are also responsible for repopulating the Amônia river with turtles, which were almost extinct by the ‘80s; more than 5,000 yellow-spotted river turtles have been bred to date. The Apiwtxa village has numerous environmental initiatives, that seek for a sustainable use of the land. Their territory has a management plan that reserves areas for animal refuges and institutes a rotation of hunting areas. In 2008, the community received the Chico Mendes Prize in the Community Association category for developing activities that keep the forest standing, preserve the rivers and the environment; in 2017, it was awarded the Equator Prize by the United Nations
Development Programme, which recognizes the work of local and indigenous communities from all over the world that outstands for their positive impact on climate, environment, and poverty reduction. The work of Apiwtxa goes beyond the limits of its land, also covering other areas of the municipality and Peru. It serves as an example and inspiration for organizations, peoples, and communities in Brazil and abroad.

Recognizing the importance of working with the surrounding communities, Apiwtxa, led mainly by Benki Piyäko, managed to get the support of partners and buy a land of 86 hectares right across from the small town of Marechal Thaumaturgo to build the Centro Yorenka Âtame (Forest Knowledge Centre) that opened its doors on July 7, 2007. The Centre is a space for intercultural dialogue, exchange, and appreciation of traditional knowledge, encouraging discussions and valuing the region's bio and cultural diversities. It hosts meetings, trainings and debates with the aim of uniting indigenous and non-indigenous people for the protection of the environment, helping disseminate sustainable practices that allow for the development of the region whilst managing the natural resources in a non-destructive way. Yorenka Âtame is also a practical example, as it transformed devastated land into an agroforestry system, while helping advance sustainable development of which the Ashaninka became the local protagonists.

Nowadays, the Apiwtxa village exercises great influence over other communities of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples of the Juruá region and other Ashaninka villages in Peru. Exemplary for this is a recent project (2015-2018) managed by the community’s association, and sponsored by the Amazon Fund, through the BNDES Brazilian public bank. The Alto Juruá project, as it was called, was also the first contract to be signed directly by the BNDES and an indigenous association, indicating the level of organization and leadership that the Apiwtxa community have. The Alto Juruá project had actions on and impacted not only the Kampa do Rio Amonea Indigenous Territory, but also the Kaxinawá/Ashaninka Indigenous Territory of the Breu River, and the Alto Juruá Extractive Reserve, which together have more than six times the area of the Amônia river territory. The project's main areas of action were: implementation of agroforestry systems, including training for local people; territorial and environmental management of lands, with protection and vigilance actions; and institutional strengthening of local associations.
The latest undertaking of the Ashaninka of the Amônia river is being developed under Benki Piyãko’s leadership. In 2018, a parcel of land of 22 hectares connecting to both the Juruá river and the Yorenka Ātame’s area was bought for the construction of a new Center, called Yorenka Tasorentsi (Knowledge of the Creator). In 2019, another 1,147 hectares of land were acquired to be part of this new Center, which is partially deforested, and will be reforested under Yorenka Tasorentsi’s initiative. Both areas were bought through the donation of foreigners who have experienced Benki’s powers as a shaman, healing people and the land through ayahuasca rituals and conservation actions. The Center has many objectives and feels like a continuation of the work started in Yorenka Ātame. On Yorenka Tasorentsi, however, the spiritual aspect is highlighted. The new vision embraces the recovery of degraded land, including the dream of planting up to 10 million trees; protecting wild animals; safeguarding traditional indigenous knowledge; environmental training; spiritual empowerment; the healing of people with the use of plant medicines, such as ayahuasca and others. The idea is to act locally, but have a global influence—not only is the conservation of the Amazon an act that has positive effects on climate change and the health of the planet, but Benki plans on teaching people there who might serve as change agents all-over the world. It was born out of an international network, and will certainly go on sharing fruits across the globe.

Elements in their past provide a key to their future; anchored in something that has always been. Stefano Varese describes an important moment of their history, and how they managed to overcome adversity and secure their cultural survival:

Salt was taken away from the Campa society, just as the smithies that had been preserved and used for centuries had been destroyed before. By depriving it of these two cultural elements, (...) perhaps a more rapid death or an accelerated integration of this native society into white and mestizo society could be expected; but none of that happens. The Campa culture (...) manages to recover and reestablish the lost balance. Trade will gain more momentum: what cannot be built in the smithies, will be obtained by barter with other groups or with the settlers, salt will also be sought through trade, and we can think that these new stimuli to the already traditional commercial network will serve at the same time to tighten the intertribal links of the Campa and thus increase their cultural unity. (Varese 1968, 106-107)
What we see is a level of flexibility, perseverance, and resilience that are a testimony to the strength of who these people are, allowing the Ashaninka not only to survive, but to thrive. Such resilience is rooted in the deep core of their culture, and in profound currents of their past. These ancient ways have not gone away; they continue to inspire the people and are in fact a foundation of their cultural survival. Part of that strength comes from power plants such as ayahuasca, and the living practice of shamanic rituals.

The shaman embodies the Campa culture; he is the earthly representative of divine wisdom, the custodian and the interpreter of tradition. (...) And why shouldn’t [the community] have faith in his powers when they see them every moment? The shaman heals, defeats death, or can send it against enemies. The shaman is the hero who has overcome all obstacles and trials on his initiatory path; he has managed to be the husband of tobacco, shiri who is a woman and facilitates magical flight, he has managed to master other hallucinogenic plants, he can transform into a bird, travel to the world of the dead or repeat without difficulty the actions that the divinities performed in the beginning of the times. (Varese 1968, 133)

Just as the Ashaninka walk between mountain and forest, so do they constantly walk between this mundane world and the realm of the spirits. Comfortable in multiple realities, they roam between those experiences, and that is part of their strength. Remarkably adaptable and resilient in the face of adversity, I hope to illustrate how their cultural resilience is inspired by their connectivity to the spirit realms, mediated by ayahuasca and the shaman, which has given them confidence to carry on.

The Ashaninka of the Apiwtxa village have had an extraordinary capacity of balancing tradition with western ideas and practices. They became a benchmark when it comes to sustainable living in the Amazon; they partnered with national and international institutions for the protection of the environment and biodiversity, and soil restoration. Through its shamans and spiritual knowledge so many have been healed. A people living, as always, between worlds, at the frontier, between the high and the low lands, the visible and the invisible worlds, the modern and the archaic. Getting the best of each, creating networks, and promoting a harmonious way of living that ultimately generates health, peace, and abundance. I feel very lucky to have met them, as I continue to learn from these sincere and kind people, who are also true warriors, ready to die for the defense of their land and the revered forest.
IV – Ashaninka Spirituality and Forest Conservation

Are we one and only humanity?
Worldviews and the different ways of seeing the land

The Doce River, which we, the Krenak, call Watu, our grandfather, is a person, not a resource, as economists say. It is not something that someone can take ownership; it is a part of our construction as a collective that inhabits a specific place. (Ailton Krenak)

When you look at a mountain, a river, or a forest, what do you see? Stacked ores that can become a car or a cell phone? Hydroelectric potential, to keep our cities lit by day and by night? Wood to build furniture and floors? Or a deity, a sacred being, or even a wise elder of your family? The way we answer this question indicates the worldview of the culture we grew up in, and therefore the way we learn to see and relate to what we call nature. In European culture, which spread around the world after the ‘discovery’ and colonization of the Americas, we look at the landscape and see nothing other than resources to be exploited. Raw material that must eventually be transformed into merchandise that we can buy, use, store, sell. The human, ‘son of God’, is born with the right to exploit the land for his own benefit, without worrying about anything else, without thinking about the consequences, and without considering other species and everything else that is not human and shares this planet with us; and has its home on it. Humans hold a superiority in an invented hierarchy. We are, supposedly, at the top of this pyramid and the world (perhaps the universe) is ours to be exploited. But does all mankind think this way? Is there really a single homogeneous humanity?

The Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa, in his book, "The falling sky" (2013), describes the ‘white man’ (non-indigenous) as ‘the people of the merchandise’, a people with an insatiable desire for things, for possessing objects, and for accumulating. Such passion for merchandise would obscure and limit thinking, preventing the understanding and appreciation of everything else, especially the spiritual world, the world that cannot be seen or touched. Davi suggests that white men are so passionate about the goods that they even dream of them. Yanomami
shamans, on the other hand, dream of xapiri (spirits of the forest), and do not accumulate objects. When a Yanomami dies, all of his belongings, and even his body, are burned. Among them, there is no concept of inheritance, of leaving your property to your descendants. As Kopenawa says, "Our real goods are the things of the forest: its waters, fish, game, trees, and fruit. Not merchandise! This is why as soon as someone dies we make all the objects he kept disappear" (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 330). That makes me think: in a society in which goods are not accumulated, in which money does not circulate internally, what is considered to be rich? Clearly, the values are different. So that I question again, is there really a single humanity?

Ailton Krenak, one of the greatest indigenous leaders in Brazil, whose quote opens this chapter, also asks this question in his book "Ideas to postpone the end of the world" (2019). He even suggests that the very process that authorizes and justifies the colonization of other peoples and their cultures is born out of the idea that there is a right way to live. Civilized man would have a duty to bring the savage into the bosom of civilization. But wouldn’t this simply be a way of suppressing diversity? The promise is that if we all have the same conception of how to live on this planet, if we are a single civilized humanity, then we will certainly be on the path of evolution, we will be the future; we will perpetuate ourselves as the dominant species and therefore the winner. But is this really true, or is it our own Western myth? Conquering and dominating nature—an inanimate, inferior nature, devoid of meaning—made us truly superior? Or has it brought us to the brink of an environmental, and ultimately human, catastrophe? Depersonalizing and 'disanimating' mountains, rivers, seas and forests leads us to destroy them without guilt, without ritualization, without even considering the possibility of reciprocity and interdependence with the Earth. If a mountain is nothing but ore, and a forest is nothing but wood, then there is no problem in turning it into waste from extractive activities.

There are, in fact, many other ways of imagining the world. Many peoples still have a reciprocal relationship, and even kinship, with the beings and elements of nature. Krenak remarks sensitively that "[this] living organism that is the Earth, which in some cultures continues to be recognized as our mother and provider in broad senses, not only in the dimension of subsistence and in the maintenance of our lives, but also in the transcendent dimension that gives meaning to our existence" (Krenak 2019, 42-43). From this point of view, the Earth would
not only be the provider of the food and water we need to live, but as part (and not external and superior beings) of this same nature, it brings us meaning and significance. It is not for nothing that different people from the Andes pay homage, celebrate, and give offerings to the mountains. For them, they are not a pile of rocks, they are alive, sentient and sacred. So too, for the Ashaninka, the forest is a living entity, full of enchanted spiritual beings. There is more, much more, than meets the eye, and we need to expand our thinking, allowing it to soar beyond materialistic rationality to be able to understand what the forest is to the Ashaninka, and the importance that preserving it has for them.

**Mind and spirit; science and religion: different ways of knowing**

> For it is impossible that the reasoning part in us should be other than spiritual; (...) there being nothing so inconceivable as to say that matter knows itself. (Blaise Pascal)

I have just proposed that we expand our thinking beyond rational logic. However, I am aware of the paradox I find myself in, deciding to conduct an academic study on ancestral spiritual practices of what we call shamanism. I am not the first and I certainly will not be the last, but how to communicate an experience as intangible as a shamanic ceremony, or a genuine hierophany? "The academic analysis of shamanism will always be the rational study of the nonrational – in other words, a self-contradictory proposition or a cul-de-sac" (Narby 1999, 18). Because it is contradictory, should we give up without trying? I propose the attempt. In my research, I accept the explanations that were revealed to me in the field, even though I am aware of the challenges, the limits, and the paradoxes. I allow the logic accepted by those who follow the spiritual path in the Apiwtxa village to be described without judgment, without it necessarily having to make sense to me, or to those who will read this work. But I try to show the existing connections, and the practical and tangible consequences that this other way of thinking generates in the physical and material environment they inhabit: the forest. I also use the visual language of photography, in its 'documental-imaginary' aspect, which is grounded in reality, but which nevertheless creates wings for the imaginary. It is when “the photographic
device produces visible traces of phenomena that are radically invisible to the human eye” (Schaeffer 1996, 21). Thus, I hope that photography will be yet another instrument in bringing understanding to the subject of my research, adding to the written material and the ethnographic knowledge.

However, in addition to accepting without judgment, and to using another type of language besides writing, I’d also like to briefly question the dominant hegemony of rational logic over magical and religious thinking. After all, is there a unique path to knowledge? Let it be clear that my intention is not to question the advances that scientific tradition has brought to humanity, but science is a continuous search, constantly in flux, yet it has not managed to explain everything, and I suspect that it never will, simply because not everything is explainable by the mind. Scientific thinking explains how, but not why. The rational approach tends to fragment the whole, often losing sight of the comprehensive and holistic view of the phenomena.

In order to complement and give more depth to the thought I expound, I share here the contemplation made by two acclaimed anthropologists who, in different ways, touched on this issue and expressed it with mastery:

If religion essentially is a formulation of the supernatural and an organization relating society to it, then science appears quite simply to be a form of religion—a very special form, perhaps. The victory of "science" over "religion" in the Western cultures, then, if such it be, can be seen more precisely as the replacement of one form of religion (one view of the hidden reality) by another (...). The claims of science to possessing the only correct world view, the only correct approach to reconstructing the hidden reality, and the only set of ideas about the hidden reality worthy of acceptance, are no different from the claims of any religion to possession of the truth. (...) The very replacement of "religion" by "science" in the Western cultures is highly suggestive: replacement can only mean that both fit into the same slot in the general structure of cultural systems, and perform the same functions. (Weiss 1975, 509-510)

During the Renaissance and well into the Enlightenment, in our quest for personal freedom, we in the European tradition liberated the human mind from the tyranny of absolute faith, even as we freed the individual from the collective, which was the sociological equivalent of splitting the atom. And, in
doing so, we also abandoned many of our intuitions for myth, magic, mysticism, and, perhaps most importantly, metaphor. The universe, declared René Descartes in the seventeenth century, was composed only of “mind and mechanism.” With a single phrase, all sentient creatures aside from human beings were devitalized, as was the earth itself. “Science”, as Saul Bellow wrote, “made a housecleaning of belief.” Phenomena that could not be positively observed and measured could not exist. (...) The triumph of secular materialism became the conceit of modernity. (Davis 2009, 120)

Thus, aware of the dogmatic nature that both religion and science can have, and of how the transcendent meaning of life is reduced when the universe is limited to what can be observed and measured with the resources of the mind, we are more apt and hopefully open to understanding better the worldview the Ashaninka propose to us.

I would also like to acknowledge the inherent challenge of not only seeking a translation of a spiritual experience into words, but of the ethnographic experience itself, which inevitably brings losses, due to the various limitations intrinsic to translation between languages, signs, cultures, and ontologies. “Access to ethnographic knowledge is achieved primarily by the ordeal of the body and by how much it is necessary to reach the limits of one’s own thinking in order to begin to discover that of others” (Kopenawa and Albert 2015, 518-519). Still, despite all the challenges, the exercise of trying to decipher that, which may be undecipherable, seems valid to me. The very act of trying, expands our thinking and can take us closer to what sometimes seems inaccessible. Aware of the difficulties, limitations, and paradoxes that are involved in this study, enables us to enter the fascinating universe of the spirituality, practiced by the Ashaninka of Apiwtxa, with greater precision, intuition and understanding. The mysteries will continue—I do not propose to unravel them all, nor could I, even if I wanted to—but the wealth of this other world certainly brings us a unique wisdom that is also difficult to access. I am grateful for the trust that has been placed in me and I will seek to translate the learnings that have been revealed to me in the most faithful and authentic way possible. I hope that my personal lens, shaped by the experiences accumulated in over twenty trips to Apiwtxa, and my genuine curiosity and sincere respect for the Ashaninka’s ancestral knowledge will help in building a bridge between cultures, between ontologies, and even between worlds.
Shamanism and the invisible world

Everything is more than it appears, for the visible world is only one level of perception. Behind every tangible form, every plant and animal, is a shadow dimension, a place invisible to ordinary people but visible to the shaman. (Wade Davis)

In the village of Apiwtxa, spiritual practices can be described as shamanic. The shaman personifies both the priest and the doctor; the healing of the body necessarily involves reconnecting with the spirit, and a holistic and integrated harmonization is sought. Ayahuasca, coca, and tobacco are the three plants that open the Ashaninka’s spiritual world to seekers, and are used together in the community’s religious rituals.

Ayahuasca is a word from the Quechua language whose ethology is: Aya = person, soul, spirit and Wasca = rope, climbing vine, liana, vine. Therefore, a literal translation could be 'the vine of the souls', or 'the rope of the spirits'. This powerful brew is an infusion produced by the slow decoction of the Amazonian *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine together with the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* bush, which contains DMT (N, N-Dimethyltryptamine), a powerful hallucinogenic alkaloid.

In the non-indigenous world, shamanic practices are associated with the use of psychedelic substances. But from the point of view of the Amazonian peoples—who keep the shamanic tradition alive—what characterizes shamanism? Viveiros de Castro defines shamanism as "essentially a cosmic diplomacy dedicated to the translation between ontologically heterogeneous points of view" (Viveiros de Castro 2006, 320), since shamans are those capable of mediating the relationship between humans and non-humans, in particular those invisible to the common man, the spirits. The shaman is capable, not only of seeing the spirits, but also of seeing as the spirits, being able to temporarily assume the point of view of what is supernatural and then come back to convey to us this experience. "My skin [body] remained on the ground in our house while my inner part crossed the heights. Then, all of a sudden, I was able to see in the same way as the *xapiri* and, thus, everything became clearer" (Kopenawa and Albert 2015, 329).

Indeed, entheogenic plants are instrumental in shamanic rituals; it is through their ingestion or inhalation that consciousness expands, and perception changes. They enable a redirecting of the
gaze, essential for this redefinition of the boundaries between the visible and the invisible. Among those regularly using ayahuasca, there is common understanding that ayahuasca 'makes you see, see everything'. Certainly, it is a visual-inducing substance, a property attributed to DMT, the molecule contained in the shrub *Psychotria viridis*, also known as *Rainha* (Queen).

But to talk about being able to see the spirits, requires believing in these invisible beings first. There is a set of basic ideas that makes shamanism possible within the cosmologies of the peoples who practice it. One of the main concepts is precisely the existence of spirits and enchanted beings:

The central image dominating the whole field of Yaminahua shamanic knowledge is that of *yoshi* – spirit or animate essence. In Yaminahua thought all things in the world are animated and given their particular qualities by *yoshi*. Shamanic knowledge is, above all, knowledge of these entities, which are also the sources of all the powers that shamanism claims for itself. (Townsley 1993, 452)

Among the Ashaninka, it is believed that there are good spirits, as well as demons. In fact, there is a whole spiritual world, invisible under normal conditions, but connected to the physical world, existing concurrently with the reality that we humans routinely see. It is in the spiritual world that the protective beings of the forest, the 'owners of the animals', and the 'enchanted ones' are found; it is where the sacred knowledge left by *Pawa*, the creator God in the Ashaninka culture, is kept. The key to accessing it is ayahuasca.

Another basic concept is precisely that of *axis mundi*, axis or center of the world, a symbolic opening, through which it is possible to move between the lower and upper worlds. It is mentioned by Mircea Eliade in his book "Shamanism: archaic techniques of ecstasy". According to Eliade, the *axis mundi* allows communication between heaven and earth by a ladder, rope, vine, or other related images, enabling the gods to descend to earth and men to ascend to heaven. The axis of the world is the place where the different layers of the cosmos—heaven, earth, and the underworld—meet. Not everyone can move between worlds. Ascending to heaven or descending to the underworld is a feat that only a few are able to achieve. Shamans,
cosmic diplomats that they are, have this interworld communication and transit as part of their craft. When referring to them, Eliade maintains that:

there are "specialists in the sacred," men able to "see" the spirits, to go up into the sky and meet the gods, to descend to the underworld and fight the demons, sickness, and death. (...) a member of the community is able to see what is hidden and invisible to the rest and to bring back direct and reliable information from the supernatural worlds. (Eliade [1951] 2004, 509)

Within the context of the Ashaninka, the axis mundi is present. The first aspect that makes it possible is the way in which the universe is conceived by them: different layers, vertically superimposed on each other. According to Gerald Weiss (1975), the earth is the intermediate level, called Kamavéni. Below are the Kivinti and Sarinkavéni levels, the latter being the stronghold of the demons. Above Kamavéni is Menkóri, the cloud plateau, and further up is Henóki, or Inkíte (most used in Apiwtxa), which comprises many celestial layers, where good spirits and gods live. The sky of each layer is the floor of the one above it. Thus, effectively, a central axis that extends through the different levels of the cosmos can potentially allow ascending and descending between worlds.

However, even more striking is the Ashaninka cosmogonic myth itself that reports Pawa’s ascent from Earth to his new abode in heaven. Weiss, who immersed himself in Ashaninka cosmology, reports that different individuals have pieces or fractions of this great and complex knowledge, without a single Ashaninka possessing it in its entirety. This creates some inconsistencies, as Weiss points out. In his research, he noticed three different versions of the myth of Pawa’s ascent. One of which looks like the one reported in Apiwtxa. To maintain greater uniformity, I will describe here an abridged version of the myth as it is told in the thesis of anthropologist Margarete Mendes (1991), whose research was carried out in the same community. I complement the part that specifically refers to ayahuasca, as reported to me by the shaman Moisés Piyãko, and that is not found in Mendes’ version.

As a story of the creation of the world, it takes place during primordial times. At the beginning of the Cosmos, Pawa, his wife and children lived on the earth at the same level as humans. They lived and worked as people do. After a fight between Pawa and his brother, the sibling is killed
and transformed into a rock, into *ishico*. *Pawa* then decides to leave this world, climb a stairway (back then, the earth and the sky were very close, as close as a house's ceiling), ascending to the upper level. He summons everyone for a *piyarentsi* (traditional fermented drink celebration), to announce his departure. At these final moments, *Pawa* transforms his children, Ashaninka, into different animals and other natural beings. But upon his departure, he was asked: "who will continue to teach us"? He responded, "I'm going, but I'm not abandoning you. I will remain present". Finally, he transformed two ashaninkas: a woman in *horowa* (*Psychotria viridis*) and a man in ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*). He explained how to prepare the tea, so that his teachings would continue—how to heal people, how to live on Earth. *Kamãpi*, signifying 'ayahuasca brew' in the Ashaninka language, is the connecting medium of *Pawa*’s home with us on Earth.

Even in this synthesized version, it is possible to notice the literal interpretation of a ladder that connects the Earth to the sky. Also, within the scope of this study, it seems most relevant to me the importance of ayahuasca as a connecting force between these realms. In a testimony during my fieldwork, Moisés asserts that "ayahuasca is *Pawa*; it is *Pawa*’s arm, as I was saying. So, it is the continuity of the teaching of everything. It allows you to access all the knowledge that *Pawa* left here on Earth, 'enchanted', that our physical eyes cannot see. So, ayahuasca is the spirit that leads to the spiritual world of *Pawa*, to be able to access the knowledge, or what he created here on Earth".

**Amerindian perspectivism and the humanity of all beings**

All japós [pied crested oropendolas] are human. Everybody is aware of this, since they live as a society and weave their nests: they are, in short, weavers like the Ashaninka. The shamans, who, under the influence of ayahuasca, are able to see rightly, corroborate the humanity of the japós: they report that japós live like humans, they grow manioc, they drink *kamarãpi* (ayahuasca), they drink manioc beer (*caiçuma*). They are even superior to humans, insofar as they keep the peace among themselves and live without discord. They are the children that *Pawa*, the sun, left on earth, they are the children of ayahuasca. (Manuela Carneiro da Cunha)
We saw the importance that spirit, animated essence, invisible non-human beings, and enchanted beings have for the very existence of shamanism, since the shaman is the one responsible for managing the relationship with these entities that most of us, humans, cannot see, hear, or understand. The shaman sees, talks to, and is able to translate the message that needs to be brought to the community, including to those who do not participate, or at least do not usually participate, in the rituals. Perhaps it is precisely this animated essence shared by humans and non-humans that creates the space for interactions where shamanism takes place.

To shift our thinking and point of view, to bring it closer to that experienced and shared by many Amazonian peoples, including the Ashaninka, I would like to bring the concept of 'Amerindian perspectivism', as presented by Viveiros de Castro in his noteworthy article "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism". First, he questions the classic distinction between nature and culture. Instead, he suggests:

'multinaturalism' to designate one of the contrastive features of Amerindian thought in relation to Western 'multiculturalist' cosmologies. Where the latter are founded on the mutual implication of the unity of nature and the plurality of cultures – the first guaranteed by the objective universality of body and substance, the second generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning – the Amerindian conception would suppose a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity. Here, culture or the subject would be the form of the universal, whilst nature or the object would be the form of the particular. (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 470)

And further on, when addressing the concept of perspectivism itself, he says:

the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world – gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artefacts – differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves. Typically, in normal conditions, humans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (as prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as human (...).
In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a ‘clothing’) which conceals an internal human form. (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 470-471)

Finally, in terms of the concepts that I seek to bring to our attention within the Amerindian perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro, he writes: "To say, then, that animals and spirits are people is to say that they are persons, and to attribute to non-humans the capacities of conscious intentionality and agency which define the position of the subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed" (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 476). This last quote relates directly to the beginning of this chapter, when Ailton Krenak refers to the Doce River, Watu, as a person, grandfather of the Krenak. In the end, what does it mean to say that animals, plants, rivers, and weather phenomena are people? On the one hand, we can think of it as extreme anthropocentrism, placing humanity at the center of everything, in the very essence of many of nature’s aspects. However, we must remember that the Amerindians do not share with us this radical division between culture and nature, human and animal, body and spirit, etc. On the contrary, I would say that this humanizing conception of the world around us brings ecology (a concept, as we understand it today, a priori made relevant in the ’70s) to the mythical and ancestral time, being totally absorbed and incorporated in the traditional culture. Kopenawa expresses this idea with clarity and simplicity:

In the forest, we human beings are the "ecology". But it is equally the xapiri, the game, the trees, the rivers, the fish, the sky, the rain, the wind, and the sun! It is everything that came into being in the forest, far from the white people: everything that isn’t surrounded by fences yet. The words of "ecology" are our ancient words, those Omama gave our ancestors at the beginning of time. (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 393)

If everything is human, then being human is no longer special. If the essence of animals is human, if they are also people, how can we continue to conceive of ourselves as being at the top of a hierarchy? Instead, and if we are no longer so exceptional, it becomes easier to perceive ourselves as part of nature, as being the very forest in which one lives. The indigenous leader Nara Baré once said to me: "we are the forest defending itself".
Also in Ashaninka cosmology, animals, plants and even celestial bodies were ashaninkas in primordial times. Still today, the essence, the spirit of these beings and phenomena is human to them. However, under normal conditions, our eyes cannot see its true form. It is only through the ingestion of ayahuasca, or other entheogens from his ancestral tradition, that the Ashaninka shaman is able to enter the spiritual world, and there, see and communicate with the spirits, speaking to them in their authentic human form. Moisés explained this to me clearly, saying:

Because inside the forest are the 'enchantments'. There are all our stories about the people that Pawa transformed into a bird, a tree, a star, and the moon as well. So, these people were all spiritual people once. They were the ones who were with Pawa creating the planet, conceiving it. So, our story says that we participated in the creation of the spirit of each thing, of each being, of nature. Where nothing was matter yet. Everything was spirit. So, we lived with the plants, with the animals, we talked, everyone understood each other; at anyone's moment of need, the other was present to help; and all was spirit. So, at every moment they appeared as people to you and talked, everyone did their part. Then, time passed, and plants, animals, everything materialized. And then everyone started to stay in their place. And with each one staying in their place, after materializing, that part of contact was lost. Because each of these, when it was a spirit, they talked to you. Then, they remained like, what we say, the 'enchantment'. Each one stood there in their place as 'enchantment' with their powers, do you understand?

Then, when I asked him about whether it was possible to communicate with the spirits of the forest, plants, and animals, he replied:

This communication is in the spiritual world. It is not corporeal, in this sense, in this world that we are like this, normal. These are communications in the spiritual world. So, we communicate with everything, we connect with all this story that I was saying before. When we enter the spiritual world, we return to that time that I was saying about creation, where everything is spirit, everyone communicates, so that you can communicate with what’s here, that Pawa left for us to watch over, take care of, study, follow the path.

Thus, the ritual connects the present with the past, as a foundation for the future. This unity of times in the expanded instant of the ceremony generates a sense of continuity, where it is possible to contemplate the time of the origins and seek answers to current problems. In this way, the myths provide a map for the way forward, occurring in parallel, in an eternal primordial present. But it is the unique experience of each ritual, through the master plants,
that creates a re-connection and at the same time a new temporal connection. The sacred transcends the everyday order and creates an opening in time and space that delivers a non-material experience in a tangible way, possible to be visualized and later incorporated.

**The darkness of the ritual and the light of the spirit**

*It is in the darkness that we know the world. It is in the darkness that we know where we came from. The darkness remembers us, and when we remember who we are, we return to the most remarkable nothing.*  
(Monica Gagliano)

*Kamarãpi* rituals usually take place at night and can go on until the dawn. In the tradition of the Ashaninka, not even a fire is lit. There can be no light interference, so the ceremony occurs in total darkness. According to Moisés' explanation "we say in darkness, but for us it is in the light, the light that comes from above. Because such is the light that gives us light, that gives us energy, that makes us see the spiritual world". It is yet another element that helps awake the participant’s inner awareness by suppressing external distractions. Ayahuasca visions shall guide his or her consciousness and show worlds, spirits, elements and dynamics otherwise invisible to the human eye. A quiet and peaceful environment is expected, so that nature might be given prominence. Only the sacred chants, or forest sounds, will break the silence of the night.

The ritual starts ahead of the night of the actual ceremony. To prepare the sacred drink, it is necessary to harvest the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the *Psychotria viridis* leaves, also called *horowa* in Aruak. The vine is pounded in order to break down its structure, before being boiled along with the leaf. Weiss, in his research carried out among the Ashaninka people of Peru, in the early 1960s, says that the vine is cultivated, but the leaf is not. Nowadays, with the international ayahuasca boom, and the greater demand for the plants, both the vine and the leaf are cultivated. For the preparation process, a diet with food restrictions and sexual abstinence must be observed—as a means to connect and honor the spiritual energy that will be encountered. The same kind of restrictions are expected in the days leading up to the ritual itself. Preferably, one should not eat on the night of the ceremony, nor consume certain
beverages, while also abstaining from sexual activities for at least two days prior to and after the ceremony. In theory, the brew may be prepared by women, but in Apiwtxa this is not the tradition. Women consume it, and learn how to heal, but do not prepare it themselves. When menstruating, they should not participate in the ceremonies, and must stay away from whoever is preparing the tea. It is said that the menstruation’s physical cleaning process interferes with the energy of ayahuasca, i.e. the chants and visions do not manifest. In the traditional setting, men in preparing the medicine work alone or in pairs, in silence and with intense focus, well aware that they are already on the sacred path of learning. After all, each new brew is seen as a continuation of the participant’s long spiritual journey. The process of decocting is slow and can easily last an entire night. Ashaninka Kamarâpi, as opposed to other ayahuasca ‘liquors’ tends to be more viscous in consistency and also more concentrated, often boiled until it resembles honey more than tea. The taste is usually very bitter and earthy, provoking nausea right away. It literally feels like drinking roots and earth combined; vomiting is very common, though the shaman himself will rarely, if ever, do so. Nonetheless, purging is seen in a very natural way, considered to be part of the cleansing process that takes place on both levels, the body and the spirit.

In rituals taking place in Apiwtxa, the shaman is the first to be served. A kind of silent meditation will follow, while each person waits for the ‘force’ to arrive, as the ayahuasca’s trance is referred to. Time really seems to enter a circular cycle and break free from clocks and linearity. When perception starts to change and the doors of parallel worlds open, the ancient Aruak chants are evoked in full power, inducing the visions, and sustaining the atmosphere. Each chant has a specific meaning and calls for different energies and spirits; it can request for the ‘force’ to come on stronger, or oppositely, smoother; it can ask for the strengthening of the mirações (visions), or for the allowance of healings. Kamarâpi and sacred chants are inextricably linked, with songs stimulating, directing, and clarifying the visions.

The language of the songs is not the everyday one, but liturgical and archaic. Even people from the community cannot necessarily comprehend its meanings. Moisés says that most chants are untranslatable, because it is another language all together, different, spiritual. Only those who are able to experience the depth of the Ashaninka spiritual world can understand their
meanings. The goal at any rate is not to understand anything in a literal or material sense, but rather to know the medicine spiritually as a catalyst to the divine. The chants are not created, but rather channeled by the shamans during the rituals; often heard echoing from places in the forest where there are ayahuasca vines. Ultimately, all this knowledge belongs to the plant itself, which, given by Pawa, is sacred, and guides the seekers on how to live on Earth.

The ‘force’ really feels like a strong pressure, and the body becomes heavy, making it difficult to move; more likely, the desire will be to let yourself melt, surrender to it, and lay down. However, that’s not what the shaman recommends, as one should receive it seated. The senses get heightened, as sounds and smells will be more deeply absorbed, not to mention the potency given to the sight. If the eyes are opened, sensibility to light will be much stronger, and new previously unseen geometric colorful patterns can also appear within visible dimension—yes, other worlds do unveil—; though Kamarãpi’s experience is usually lived with eyes closed. Mirações can happen with opened eyes, but might be overwhelming. In fact, the whole experience is always overwhelming on one way or the other, and definitely not advised for those weak of spirit. But for the ones worthy of it, and brave enough to face it, ayahuasca can be such an enlightening experience, opening the doors of the spiritual world and sharing rich, precious knowledge. As shaman Benki Piyäko puts it:

Ayahuasca is not a religion. But an identity of connection between man and nature; man and the astral, within the knowledge of this coexistence with the land, the waters, the animals, the forest. Because it is a connection that brings an understanding, a comprehension of what a medicine is. Ayahuasca is not made to drink and be delirious. Ayahuasca is a healing plant. Not everyone is a shaman and not everyone has this vocation to be a shaman. Not everyone drinks it without a need. (...) For us, ayahuasca is a drink of wisdom, knowledge, and mental reactivation. Ayahuasca is that. In addition to, when you know, work with other medicines. That's why it's not something everyone drinks, because it's not a game. It is a very sacred and serious plant as well.

As Benki’s speech tells us, more important than any of the physical sensations lived, or possible colorful lights seen, what really matters when taking Kamarãpi is the spiritual connection to the cosmos that is experienced, and the deep healing of ourselves and of our relation to the natural world. It is but inevitable to realize how alive and sentient all beings of the forest are, and in a
broader sense, the profound interconnection all forces, beings, and elements of nature share, as well as the fragility sustaining the whole planetary balance. Empathy is absolute, and the natural way is wanting to ensure all kinds of life can thrive on this planet.

**Ayahuasca, coca and tobacco as master plants**

I never went to a university to study. But I live inside a university.
I was born inside. I did not enter; I was born inside. I live inside and study every day, day and night. Where silence is my teacher.
(Moisés Piyāko)

For the Ashaninka, there are many master plants: each of which provides access to a particular knowledge, but they all have in common the fact that they carry a world of their own, a power given by *Pawa*. And such power manifests itself only in the one who uses it respecting the traditional principles of the culture. Nothing is random. Each plant expects respect; every user must follow a ritual diet specific to each medicine. Like their cosmology, knowledge of the sacred plants of the Ashaninka culture is spread among different people. Nobody knows everything. No one, alone, knows all the plants of traditional use. However, as a collective, such wisdom is complete.

This knowledge is also unified in ayahuasca. Through the ingestion of *Kamarāpi*, the seeker can learn to use all the other plants—ayahuasca is a teacher who reveals all, but also a repository of wisdom and knowledge, not unlike an encyclopedia, where all knowledge of the history of creation is kept. But in the Ashaninka tradition, ayahuasca is always used together with tobacco (smoked in a pipe without swallowing) and the coca leaf (which in turn is chewed with a small piece of *txamero*, a vine, and *ishico*, a limestone powder; together they potentiate the effects of the leaf). With these three, the use of all other plants is studied. Ayahuasca is the command of all, and the best plant to learn from. Together, *Kamarāpi*, coca and tobacco have the power to open the spiritual world to the apprentice. However, just by chewing coca and smoking the pipe it is also possible to enter the spiritual world and learn. For coca has a spiritual world; in the creation myth, she is *Pawa*’s wife. Tobacco also teaches, as it is equally a spirit. Nonetheless,
one must know how to use it. Ayahuasca, coca, and tobacco are always together when learning to become a shaman; together they heal, even while unveiling new realms of revelation.

The use of coca has deep cultural roots, reaching back to ancient times. The leaves provide energy for everyday activities, suppressing hunger and thirst. It is especially important when in a long journey inland, away from the rivers, or when undertaking spiritual diet, which requires many alimentary restrictions. However, the most important thing about coca is the concentration it enables; to be able to focus to enter the different existing worlds (be that of each plant, or the spiritual one in a broader sense). For the Ashaninka, the person who chews coca connects to the world of the origins, since Pawa also chewed it to concentrate, create and work.

Tobacco is respected by all beings of the forest: the visible and the invisible. It has the power to scare away negative things. Wherever it is blown, it chases away what is evil, whether alive or 'enchanted'. As a kind of amulet, tobacco is therefore used to protect oneself from harm. So it is used in healing, and also blown on oneself, as means to keep away bad things that may want to come closer. The importance and power of tobacco are such that what we call a shaman in Aruak is called åtawiyari or sherepiyari. Åtawiyari is a shaman of great knowledge, in several medicines, and possessor of special powers. It corresponds to the most advanced level of shamanic knowledge. Sherepiyari is also a great shaman, but his main expertise is the spirit of tobacco, and his study includes the use of 'tobacco syrup'. "In the Campa language, sheri means 'tobacco' and -pi- is the verb root meaning 'to transform', (...) the ending -piari- may be related to 'piai', the term for 'shaman' (...) the Campa term sheripiari can be translated literally as 'tobacco-shaman', and the term antiaviari would signify 'great shaman'" (Weiss 1975, 246). The existence of a sherepiyari is more common than that of an åtawiyari, who is regarded almost as a god, for his special powers of transformation, for example. Nonetheless, the respect and importance of tobacco are indisputable. Even the pipe of an Ashaninka has a special significance, as it receives the spirit and holds the spiritual energy within it. No one, other than the owner,

10 The spelling used in my research for the terms in Aruak is in line with that used in the Apiwtxa village. Hence the variation in relation to Weiss's quote, for example.
should touch or smoke it. Ayahuasca, coca and tobacco, like master plants that they are, bring
within them the potential of teaching the medicines; the tradition; of the passing on of history
and the continuity of the ancestral knowledge.

The depth, the enchantments, and the complexity of the study

We are inhabitants of the forest. We study by drinking yãkoana with our
shaman elders. (...) We would only become truly ignorant if we did not
have shamans. Just because our elders did not have schools does not
mean that they did not study. We are other people. We learn with the
yãkoana and the spirits of the forest. We die* by drinking the yãkoana hi
tree powder so that the xapiri will carry our images far away. This way
we can see very distant lands, go into the sky’s chest, or descend into the
underworld. Then we bring back these places’ unknown words so that
the inhabitants of our houses can hear them. This has always been our
way of becoming clever. (Davi Kopenawa)

*the effect of yãkoana in Yanomami language is always described by the verb "to die".

For the Ashaninka, the study of ayahuasca has no end. One never
learns everything. The
knowledge received is, in fact, from Kamarãpi itself, from its spiritual world. Townsley suggests
something similar in his study of Yaminahua shamanism. He says: "it is the yoshi who teach and
bestow powers on the initiate; other shaman only facilitate the process and prepare the initiate,
'clean him out', so as to receive these spirit powers" (Townsley 1993, 458). But Moisés Piyãko
goes further and affirms that the true shaman himself does not die, he returns to this spiritual
world, as does the knowledge itself. These teachings then wait until a new person with enough
merit appears to receive them, thus giving continuity to the traditional knowledge. Such merit is
achieved with surrender and discipline. Those who dedicate themselves to the spiritual path,
assume a commitment that, according to Moisés, if broken, can even lead to death if there is no
shaman to do the necessary healing.
The first step in surrendering to the spiritual world is a strict three-month diet\(^\text{11}\) where the spirit of the plant is received, and starts living inside the apprentice; incorporates. Then one enters a continuity diet that includes periods of intense dieting again. There is no set sequence or timeframe for this spiritual graduation, as it varies greatly from person to person. Some factors can influence, such as the existence of a lineage; personal vocation; purity of surrender to the process; intensity of dedication to studies; etc..

Moisés Piyâko began taking ayahuasca at the age of nine with his paternal grandfather, Samuel Piyâko, a great and recognized shaman. Samuel taught him about the world of Kamarâpi, what it is, told him the myths and, as a child, Moisés assisted his grandfather in preparing the brew. After his grandfather’s death, Moisés abstained from drinking the medicine for ten years. When he decided to return to this path, he prepared the tea himself and his brother Benki accompanied him in the ritual. For five years, Moisés drank it alone at home. Afterwards, a few ashaninkas from the village became his apprentices, and till this day, they usually hold ceremonies together, often joined by other residents. However, when questioned, Moisés does not call himself a shaman. He prefers to present himself only as a leader of the community. At most, he will say that he is the spiritual guide of the village. I once asked him if he did not like to declare himself a shaman and, even though he was already a master of other ashaninkas, he replied: "Pawa has not told me that I am, so I cannot say. I have knowledge, but he has not told me yet 'you are now a shaman'. So I continue. When he proclaims it, come and tell me that I am a shaman, I might even say, 'I am a shaman now'." Those involved in Apiwtxa rituals always comment on the spiritual power and knowledge that Moisés possesses, but he sees himself as an apprentice on a path that never ends. Noble humility. Perhaps for this reason, he rejects those who declare themselves shamans without having reached the depth of the study that ayahuasca bestows, and warns of the risks of this situation.

The path of shaman graduation can be compared to university degrees.

\[^{11}\text{the term 'diet' refers to food and action restrictions, including sexual abstinence; it indicates a respect and an awareness of what it means to be treading the spiritual path. It is a kind of protocol that must be followed.}\]
Shamanism resembles an academic discipline (such as anthropology or molecular biology); with its practitioners, fundamental researchers, specialists, and schools of thought it is a way of apprehending the world that evolves constantly. One thing is certain: Both indigenous and mestizo shamans consider people like the Shipibo-Conibo, the Tukano, the Kamsá, and the Huitoto as the equivalents to universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and the Sorbonne; they are the highest reference in matters of knowledge. In this sense, ayahuasca-based shamanism is an essentially indigenous phenomenon. It belongs to the indigenous people of Western Amazonia, who hold the keys to a way of knowing that they have practiced without interruption for at least five thousand years. (Narby 1999, 154)

So, just as knowing how to read and write does not make me a PhD, having a special miração does not make anyone a shaman. It is not enough to just drink the brew to be able to communicate with the spirits of the forest, or to heal someone else. To reach that level, there are tests; it is a long study. Moisés says that you learn about the human matter, the body and internal organs, and also how to look at the spirit of others. Or even, how to seek the invisible spiritual medicine to treat illnesses. In fact, he distinguishes between the knowledge of plants for the treatment of diseases, and this invisible medicine, which occurs, especially, through the breath. After all, it's not just a breath: “the blow is the primordial gift, it is the magic secret of the origin of everything in the Ashaninka world, it is the verb of all creation; it is in reality the act of full potency, the moving principle of existence and of the elemental transformation of / in any nature: it is the absolute ontological shamanic power” (Lessin 2011, 68). In rituals, those with more knowledge often blow on their own bodies with tobacco – a way to care for them, and to get rid of negative energies. One of the tests on the Ashaninka spiritual path is precisely to be in alignment so as to receive what is good, and not to let evil dominate; not to become a sorcerer, for example.

Moisés describes how the knowledge of invisible medicine is secured within nature:

In our Ashaninka spiritual world, there are 'enchantments' that need to be accessed in order to obtain the knowledge of the invisible medicine practiced by the shaman. The 'enchantments' are kept in the world of birds, jaguars, trees, flowers, mountains, stones, land, waters, minerals, thunder, lightning, sun, moon, stars, in the silence, and also in the spiritual chants. We see the japó [pied crested oropendolas], but it has an enchanted world, which is our
world that it carries, that is kept hidden. We see the japó, but we don't see the world. So it's an invisible world that's inside it.

It is in these worlds that the teaching of medicines is passed on, and this is within nature, in a dimension that is not normally seen. This is one of the reasons why, in Apiwtxa, protecting nature is so essential. To access these worlds, you need merit—there is a process that must be earned and experienced. Traditionally, the main diets were carried out in more remote places in the forest. Nowadays, this is not always possible. Being isolated, in contact only with pure nature and the spiritual world, is ideal. It is said that the 'enchanted spirits', guardians of this sacred wisdom, are more likely to appear and come near human beings in a forest that is pristine. Even villages, remote as they are from 'civilization', have many energetic interferences and temptations. After all, there are many people, pijarentsi celebrations, other energies. The traditional format, alone, isolated, facilitates the journey to the depths of the spiritual world. By being alone, immersed in the sacred energy that Pawa left on Earth, it then manifests itself and it becomes possible to meet the 'enchanted beings'. In such connection, sacred knowledge is revealed, and made visible.

In ancient times, in addition to Pawa, who enchanted (in the sense of transforming) the primordial ashaninkas into plants and animals, there were many ātawiyaris who, as gods, could also transform people. When someone was wise and respected for the great knowledge he possessed, he was 'enchanted' within the forest, so that this wisdom would be kept safe and protected forever. To access this knowledge, the path is the ingestion of ayahuasca. If an Ashaninka apprentice has reached the required level of initiation, the Kamarāpi will know and access will be granted. For those who are not of the people, it is also possible to access. However, in addition to ayahuasca, it is necessary that an Ashaninka—someone from this world, who is part of this history, this lineage—orient, show and guide the process. After all, the spiritual world is theirs, since the 'enchanted ones' were originally Ashaninka.

Finally, in mythological terms, the ashaninkas went from spirits that helped Pawa create the world to humans after Pawa blew life into clay dolls. The first humans were therefore made of the earth, made of clay. As if this elementary and intrinsic relationship with the planet and its creation was not enough, Pawa determined that the Ashaninka, that this newly created matter,
take care of all creation; take care of the forest and, therefore, of the invisible spiritual world
that inhabits it. It was Pawa’s wish, and Apiwtxa fulfills this divine intention with praise.

The dream that guides and becomes reality

For some people, the idea of dreaming is to abdicate reality, to renounce the practical sense of life. However, we can also find those who would not see meaning in life if they were not informed by dreams, in which they can seek out the songs, the cure, the inspiration and even the resolution of practical questions that they cannot make outside the dream, but that are open there as possibilities. (...) dream not as an oneiric experience, but as a discipline related to training, to the worldview, to the tradition of different peoples who have in their dreams a path of learning, of self-knowledge about life, and the application of that knowledge in their interaction with the world and with other people.

(Ailton Krenak)

How do these visions, these intuitions of the spirit guide the people of Apiwtxa, inspiring their daily life and informing them as they move through a complex and everchanging world? What is the nature of their shamanic dreams? As Viveiros de Castro suggests, "The dream, particularly the shamanic dream induced by the consumption of hallucinogens, is the via regia [the most noble path] of the knowledge of the invisible foundations of the world, both for the Yanomami and for many other Amerindian peoples." (Kopenawa and Albert 2015, 38). With the Ashaninka of Apiwtxa, the visions induced by the consumption of ayahuasca are one of the origins of this other way of knowing; this traditional and spiritual learning. I insist on emphasizing the religious aspect, since access to the spiritual world (whether for healing purposes, or for seeking answers in other areas) is the most important element in the consumption of Kamarâpi in Apiwtxa. However, despite being intangible, mirações have practical consequences, and at

12 Given the use of the term 'hallucinogens' in the quote I make from Viveiros de Castro, I consider it important to highlight the distinction between hallucinogenic and entheogenic plants. Ayahuasca, as well as yakoana and other plants considered 'power plants' by different native peoples, can be described both ways, due to its aspect of altering consciousness; resignifying the perception of the world around. Narby (2018) brings this question up in two notes from
Apiwtxa, they have a direct effect on the environmental impact of the community on their indigenous land and on the entire region where they live, since the projects conducted by the association operate regionally.

But after all, how does the intangible become tangible? By which path does the cosmological become a conservation project? How are the teachings of Kamarāpi put into practice by the community? Townsley, on his search to find out what type of knowing shamanic knowledge is, proposes we look "at the ways in which shamans construct meanings from the actual experience of their ritual", as shamanism "is not a system of knowledge or facts known, but rather an ensemble of techniques for knowing. It is not a constituted discourse but a way of constituting one" (Townsley 1993, 452). In fact, Moisés says that the way to put this knowledge into practice is by consuming ayahuasca with someone who learned to be a healer; the one we call a shaman. For he passes it on, based on his own experience, to others—including those in the community who do not participate in the rituals. Here, it is important to emphasize that even those who do not drink it, respect the practice. Because, in a way, all of them live this dual reality, where the physical and spiritual worlds coexist, and when they feel the need, they can always drink it and enter its world. Anyone from the Ashaninka people knows what they are doing when taking part in an ayahuasca ritual. He or she will never be a beginner because they hold the knowledge that is passed on through the stories, from generation to generation, since time immemorial. These stories from the original time are what we commonly call myth. However, it is worth contextualizing: "although they are classified and referred to as myths, for
the Campas they are reliable reports, handed down orally from past generations, of happenings as real as any actual event of past years" (Weiss 1975, 309).

Thus, there is no Ashaninka reality without ayahuasca, only without drinking it. The understanding of the cosmos in Ashaninka culture involves ayahuasca from its origin; the plant is integrated in the very cultural DNA of the people. Moisés says: "the world of ayahuasca is our world. History says that ayahuasca [the vine] and horowa [the leaf] are Ashaninka. So, our world already comes about within it. When people don't drink it, they have all the respect for those who do, and follow the path, and know how to do it". Therefore, in a way, the entire community is part of and incorporated into the shamanic practices carried out in the village, since the rituals guide the decisions made by the collective. Due to the inextricable connection between the visible and invisible realities, experienced by all, there is a collective understanding of the dependence that the physical survival of the people has on the spiritual world and everything that involves it. There is an awareness of the importance of each one respecting, following, and practicing the Kamarâpi commands, expressed by the shaman, so that everyone benefits.

Thus, it is observed that the shaman's voice has more weight than the voice of the others. Because "in the shaman the Campa culture is embodied; he is the earthly representative of divine wisdom, the custodian and interpreter of tradition." (Varese 1968, 133). In him, is personified the figure of the guide who shows what is necessary for the continuity of life; everything a person depends on in order to live. From food, to all trees, all birds, and even every insect in the forest, in a holistic perception of the interdependence of all beings, as Reichel-Dolmatoff also noted in his research in the northwest of the Amazon:

In Tukano culture, the individual person is conscious that he forms part of a complex network of interactions which include not only society but the entire universe. Within this context of an essential interrelatedness of all things, a person has to fulfil many functions that go far beyond his or her social roles and that are extrasocietal extensions of a set of adaptive norms. These rules or norms, then, guide a person's relationships not only with other people – past or present, kin or ally – but also with animals, plants, as a matter of fact with all biotic and non-biotic components of the environment. (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1997, 12)
Also among the Ashaninka, there is the understanding that for there to be balance and quality of life, all beings must be cared for and given the conditions to exist. Such an understanding is certainly not shared in the western extractive world, where analysis of projects often fragment the whole, in an approach resulting from the very specialized, and therefore fragmented, way of observing life. But in the holistic view shared by many Amerindian peoples, each being has a function, in a systemic and cyclical perception of the interconnection of life on the planet. And it is with this comprehensive point of view, like the eye of an eagle, that the shaman guides the actions of his people. In Ashaninka understanding, the spiritual aspect takes care of the matter. And so it is possible to notice, in an increasingly clear way, the importance that Apiwtxa’s religious practices have in the conception and realization of its environmental conservation projects. "The spiritual side that we work is the basis responsible for the existence of our people. Then come the leaders of the community, who will carry out the projects; the organization, everything. But the spiritual, the person who works the spiritual, he is the basis of the people’s existence. If that ends, it all ends!", Moisés explains.

It is in this supernatural dimension that they study how to work the material aspects of life. Guided by the master plant ayahuasca, they seek ways to keep everything in balance, and how to adapt to the situations and conditions of the present moment. If it is 'in the light of ayahuasca' that the answers are found, turning off that light, disconnecting from the spirit, means condemning the world to imbalance, and throwing the whole community into a reality without a compass to indicate the direction to be followed. It is still very important to emphasize this, because even today, the discourse (certainly outdated) of assimilation of the native peoples to the Nation-state is still strong and recurrent in Brazil and in many other countries in the world. This assimilation is, in fact, the dissolution of cultures in a westernizing pasteurizer; a suppression of the peoples' subjectivities; and an extermination of worldviews dissonant from the dominant one. Such assimilation means, in practical terms, a horde of people thrown on the outskirts of large cities, without contact with their origins, without a sense of belonging; and, at the same time, the acceleration of the process of destruction of the planet's natural habitats, and therefore of our ability to survive as a species. For, as Davi Kopenawa says, "the spirits made me understand that the forest was not endless, as I once thought it was. (...) If we did not
know anything of the xapiri, we would also know nothing of the forest, and we would be as oblivious as the white people. We would not think to defend it" (Kopenawa 2013, 257).

At Apiwtxa, however, despite all the difficulties faced over time, the Ashaninka resist, rooted in their traditional culture, and grounded in this spiritual understanding of life that the Kamarãpi continually renews and reinforces. The study of ayahuasca is endless because it is the study of life, and as a collective, it is eternal. In it, one studies evolution: how to adapt to each new moment? How to be able to live? One learns within this dimension of the sacred. And this way of being on Earth, always aware and attentive to the spiritual side of life, has been passed down from father to son since time immemorial. "Many of these people [native people of Brazil] are not individuals, but 'collective people', cells that manage to transmit their views of the world over time." (Krenak 2019, 28). At Apiwtxa, Samuel Piyãko played a key role. From having migrated from Peru to the banks of the Amônia river, supporting the marriage of his son Antonio and Dona Pití, to planting the seed of spiritual connection in his grandchildren—teaching both the preparation of the Kamarãpi and the stories of primordial times—, Samuel was the basis of everything that happens today in the Apiwtxa community. But if it is not cared for, the seed will not germinate. Moisés and those who dedicate themselves to the religious practices of the village indicate each step to follow, through their discipline in the spiritual practices, their personal dedication, and by keeping alive the flame that illuminates—the light of ayahuasca, the connection between worlds, the cosmic experience.

"Ayahuasca is the continuity of the study. Everything that is happening in our world, we enter into this spiritual world to know what to do. Nobody does it recklessly. All of this is a study. Each thing we do, we stop to think, study, looking at others, so as to be together. We also don't think individually. But there are many things about us that I can't talk about here. These things are our secrets, our world, that only we can know", Moisés tells me. And indicating the depth, the mystery, and the infinity of this continuous study, he tells me, pointing to the starry night: "Our book is there. This is just the cover. It is beautiful, right? But this is only the cover. Now, if you open it, then you can imagine. Because only the cover, everyone admires. This is our teaching book".
V – Conclusion

We resist until today. We are not the past. We exist. Our fight will always be one of resistance, of commitment to what we do, and especially our relationship with the land, with everything that exists in the forest; everything that relates to the world of our people in spirituality. (Wewito Piyäko)

"For the native peoples of the Americas, the end of the world has already happened, five centuries ago" (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017, 142). And yet, there are those who survived. Among the survivors is the Ashaninka people. Of course, there are scars, as well as adaptations—inescapable consequences, if we consider the continuous battles fought in this period. Spanish conquerors, catechizing missions, and the search for the white gold, rubber, violently marked the trajectory of this people. And yet, they survived. Not only did they survive, as in the specific case of the Apiwtxa community, they became a benchmark in terms of spiritual strength, forest preservation, and sustainable development. At this moment, when we are faced with the consequences of the Anthropocene and the threat of climate change, it becomes clearer and perhaps more urgent than ever that traditional peoples, with cosmologies different from ours, can inspire in us other ways of existing in balance with the world we live in and depend upon.

As I have shown in this study, the teachings passed down through myths for generations are put into practice in Apiwtxa with the fundamental help of shamanic rituals and the use of their sacred plant, ayahuasca. The powers of tradition, with its sustaining roots, and of adaptation, that makes the present possible, are interconnected and nourish each other, guiding the steps towards the future. And shamanic practices are the bridge between all times. These rituals are not vestiges of the past, but a vital part—anchor and pillar—of the Ashaninka’s cultural and physical survival. With this understanding, Moisés has set himself the goal of building a healing and learning center within their land, around half an hour upriver from the village. He calls it the Ashaninka Spiritual Portal, and it is under construction. He sees this center as necessary for the strengthening of his people; where the spiritual forces will take shape, constituting the true guarantee of the continuity of their culture and history. There, various activities that have not
been practiced for a long time will take place, as well as sacred ancestral rituals and the preparation of young apprentices in the Ashaninka spiritual culture. The new structure shall also provide adequate space for healers to replenish and balance energy and seek guidance to the community’s current challenges. The center will also offer an appropriate environment for elders and young ones to exchange, redeeming stories and traditional knowledge. In this way, the 'Portal' is expected to ensure the continuity of their ancient spiritual teachings and practices. The Ashaninka people show their leadership, resilience, and adaptability as they are, once again, active agents of their own cultural survival.

At this moment, even as the federal government of Brazil embraces a reactionary ideology unlike anything experienced since the dark years of a military dictatorship (1964-1985) that set out to conquer the Amazon, it is more important than ever to listen to the voices of indigenous peoples who understand the forest as they do because their lives depend on its bounty and complexity. Insofar as the government wants to 'integrate' indigenous peoples into the country’s economic-capitalist mechanism, it is necessary to show that other ways of living have a lot to teach us: in theory, by proposing other worldviews, and in practical terms, by delaying the processes of destruction and environmental crisis in which we find ourselves. And this is all related: "If there is an eagerness to consume nature, there is also an urge to consume subjectivities – our subjectivities" (Krenak 2019, 32). If we allow the differences to be suppressed, we will lose the alternatives along with it. In a crisis, an alternative can be a life-saver. After all, it is an option, something that differs from the norm, and may point out other paths. In the case of the Ashaninka, with the conservation work carried out by Apiwtxa, we can place them in the category of "cultural conservationists", when "sustainable practices and cosmology are both present" (Carneiro da Cunha and Almeida 2000, 8).

Therefore, respecting their traditional spiritual practices is as important as guarding their lands for the protection of the Amazon Rainforest. As the traditional Ashaninka rituals using Kamãpi play a fundamental role in their worldview and in the perpetuation and adaptation of these ancestral concepts and teachings to contemporary reality. In that sense, I hope that my thesis can also elucidate, or help to position ayahuasca as vital to the prosperity, not only of the Ashaninka, but of many other peoples of the Amazon who have used it since time immemorial.
Ayahuasca is not a recreational drug, nor is it a fad that takes 'gringos' to the jungle in search of healing—it is a sacred drink so intrinsic to the worldview, and therefore to the very existence of the Ashaninka people. Kamarãpi is Pawa’s arm on Earth, the key to access the spiritual world and the knowledge left by the creator here on this planet. And the spiritual, in turn, is the foundation responsible for the existence of the people, as Moisés Piyāko told me. An ancestral knowledge, practiced for at least five thousand years (Narby 1999), deserves due respect and recognition.

As a master plant, ayahuasca teaches everyone, without distinction. But the depth of the teaching and experience varies from person to person, according to the merit, dedication and lineage of each one. We should not judge what we do not understand, let alone condemn or prohibit. "The Anthropocene marks (...), and now it is Stengers who speaks, the obligation 'to dream other dreams': 'As long as we are obsessed with the ideal model of a rational, objective knowledge capable of bringing all of the Earth's peoples in agreement with each other, (...) we will remain incapable of establishing with these other peoples relations worthy of that name'' (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017, 151). So, at this critical moment in the survival of our species, and of so many others, on this planet, may we relate in a dignified way to other peoples, as well as other non-human co-inhabitants of our shared home, and as Isabelle Stengers suggests, dream other dreams. May we listen carefully, and make room for the other; that which is different from us. It is also necessary to understand that the objective, technical, and extractive vision that reigns in our current economic system, leaves no room for the existence of other forms of life. The extensive mapping, control and 'management' of the planet, the building of frontiers and dividing of lands, does not allow for the existence of beings that are oblivious to these imaginary lines and in need of freedom; like African lions that are gunned down when leaving the invisible boundary of a park. Here, it is appropriate to mention Kopenawa’s thought that criticizes "the implicit logic that, historically, led the West from the notion of 'nature', as a wild totality involving islands of civilization, into its opposite, the 'environment', where what remains of the old 'nature' is nothing more than residual spaces ('natural parks', 'biodiversity reserves' and other 'green spaces') isolated in an encompassing industrialized space" (Kopenawa and Albert 2015, 681).
Both Kopenawa (on page 324 of the same book) and Moisés describe trips around the country as situations that awakened them to what could happen to the forest; to the destructive power of the non-indigenous people. As if seeing the continuous deforested areas of what was once a rainforest would bring directly and shockingly the real possibility that the same could happen in their territories. The primary forest, with its dense and continuous tree cover, is seen as such immensity that one can perhaps imagine it will never end. However, the stark and harsh reality of the devastated lands that stretch endlessly along the roads of Brazil and the world, shows us that the forest also dies. Of the Atlantic Rainforest biome, which was once the second largest in South America, only 7% of its original coverage remains (WWF-Brazil website). Studies by the acclaimed scientist Carlos Nobre on the Amazon rainforest estimate that it will reach an inflection point where its climate will change, and it will enter a process of savannization when it reaches 20 to 25% deforestation of its original area. Today we are at 17%. So, just as the bad example of non-indigenous people inspired the Ashaninka and Yanomami’s efforts to preserve the forest, it is time to reverse roles and be encouraged to act differently by these and other native peoples who care for nature rather than just explore it.

It must be recognized that in maintaining relations of complicity and interdependence with the nonhuman inhabitants of the world, various civilizations we have long called ‘primitives’ (the term is not very correct) have managed to avoid the inconsequent plunder of the planet to which Westerners have surrendered to from the 19th century on. Who knows, these civilizations may point us out of the impasse we are now in. (Descola 2016, 25)

If rational thinking and countless 'technical choices' have brought us to the environmental crisis we are now experiencing, we need to draw inspiration from the vast human repertoire, which includes other ways of relating to nature, so to think our way out of the impasse we find ourselves in. I am not proposing that we start living like the Ashaninka—that would not even be feasible at this point. However, neither should we expect other peoples to be like us. On the contrary! "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them" is a phrase attributed to Einstein; and that is what I am referring to. If materialist rationality has brought us to the crisis we are in, the moment calls for a worldview closer to that of the Ashaninka: in which life, agency, and conscious intentionality are not exclusive to humanity, and in which what cannot necessarily be measured and examined by the mind also
has room to exist. After all, just because a narrative is dominant does not imply that it is better than the others. Thus, in an effort to expand the reach of an ancestral knowledge so valuable and important, I decided to dedicate myself to this study. The first time I walked in the Apiwtxa village, almost twenty years ago, I did not know how important that place, its people, and the experience—so unique and different from anything I had experienced until then—would be to me. Now I do know. And that is why I come to share it; to help create space for life in diversity—for life.
Bibliography


