
[The Quechua-lamas vision of medicinal plants: a lesson from the high-altitude forests of Peru](#)

Modern people usually refer to medicinal plants as resources at the service of humans. This way of referring to them does not seem to be universal. The Quechua-lamas of the Amazon foothills regard plants as people, even more, they treat them as if they were a living community. With a resource there is a relationship of domination and exploitation, but with a person that tie is more like a conversation, a friendship. When native families use a plant, the intimate dialogue between plant and human acquires the harmony of the rite; a deep union not only between plant and human, but between deities, humans and nature takes place in such a way that in the ceremonial ingestion of the plant, it is difficult to establish identity boundaries to define who is who. Human is nature and nature is human. This profound communion enables Quechua-lamas indigenous communities to renew their relationship with the forest and its spirits, which in turn are pleased by their human creator's ability to regenerate the primordial life and wellbeing of the Amazon Forest.

Medicinal plants have a soul

The native understanding of the living does not only encapsulates what is known as the living part of the body, regardless of whether it is a plant, a human or an animal. Quechua-lamas believe that all beings, and plants in particular, have a soul (ánima they call it), and that some of them (which they call animeras) nurture souls. The natives call those "strong purgatives". The ánima, in the native vision, is not something nonmaterial, invisible and supernatural like the christian soul. The ánimas are also living beings with multiple visible forms, which the natives and even the peasants of non-native origin but with a long co-existence with the forest, commonly appreciate, be it in their homes, fields, or on the mountains.

"Each purgative has its ánima – says the Quechua-lama Custodio Cachique – when we are not prepared we do not see it." Depending on the context, this ánima can be given different names: mother, owner, spirit, shapshico, yachay, virote, devil, etc. And those names acquire meaning according to the situation in which they are lived. For example, for the children of Bajo Pucallpa – a Quechua indigenous community – the ánima of the sacred ayahuasca plant is the chullachaqui (2), while for others it is a bird or an insect. These ánimas appear as guardians of the mountain, teaching medicinal secrets, healing and curing the runas (human), and at times, helping them hunt.

For the native community, there is no life form without a family. For them, the ánima is part of the tree family. Nazario Sangama, from the community of Aviación says: "Each tree is a living being, therefore it has to have family, someone to protect it, a mother. Muquicho (a variety of banana) for example, screams from its trunk when it rains; that is his mother, it sounds like a creature being born".

It is this mother that raises the tree, while also being raised by it. Hence, the forest, according to this native experience, is a living community, protected and guarded by a community of ánimas. These ánimas present themselves particularly in healing sessions, when the person ingests the cooked or uncooked plant extract, or its resin, etc. The ánimas come when the healer sings their ícaros (sacred

songs) in healing sessions with ayahuasca (sacred plant of various cultures of the Amazon). Each *ánima*, the healers say, has its song. "My grandfather told me that every tree has its *ánima* – says Jonás Ramirez. When they invite the bark of the *ishtapi caspi*, they call him by chanting to its *ánima*. That makes you dream, while the *ánima* presents itself."

Healing with medicinal plants

When a member of the human community feels out of tune, unbalanced, they seek out the plant to recover harmony. The resin, extract or juice of a plant is taken for different purposes. The *Uchu Sanango*, for example, not only gives strength but it also strengthens the aim of the hunter. It also cures rheumatism, makes you brave, awake and not *shegue* (lazy) or fainthearted to do things.

In harmonizing, both the plant and its own vigour play an important role. There are secrets to each plant. As Don Miguel Tapullima Sangama says: "Medicinal plants cannot be picked just anywhere; you pick them up where the sun rises or where it sets. Nor should you collect them when you slept poorly or late. They must be picked very early, when the moon is mature (full moon), then they are stronger." Most healers agree that the resins must be extracted in "*macllak*" (fasting and without washing the mouth). An important aspect of healing is how the plant is prepared. The mixture, the dosage, the way you cook it and the moon in which you invite the potion are other issues to take into consideration.

To call the one preparing the plant a healer means that it is this person's role – besides being a *chacarero* (someone who lives in a *chácara*, a farm) – to take care of the health of humans. His/her body has to be in tune with nature. A healer must also have what is called a "healing hand". A healer is a carer of the community, and a condition to heal is that he or she is also healthy, that is to say keeping proper diets, abstains from sexual relations before healing, etc.

Even collecting the plants from the fields or the mountain requires a healing hand. A sick hand can cause damage or even death to a plant. Not everyone can invite a plant, says Jonás Ramirez: "The person has to know its *ánima*, only the one who has learned can give, otherwise s/he will make us err". To err is to lose the way of healing. You err when you do not follow the requirements associated with the diet that a plant demands. When this happens, illnesses may occur to those who take them, and if not cured in time, even death.

Don Ruperto Sajami emphasises the role of the *ánimas*. He says: "The *ánimas* of the plants will heal" and adds: "The *Manchinga* is a strong wood, it is used to strengthen bones and its mother is the *supay* (devil). When you take its resin, it heals you. But you must take it as part of a diet, otherwise its *ánimas* will leave. When you take it, it makes you dream, and in your dreams it tells you everything." For many diseases, in the native view, knowledge is not derived from the healer's know-how. As explained by Don Miguel Tapullima Sinarahua: "Those same trees teach us which ones can be used as purgatives and which ones cannot. Sometimes they present themselves in dreams. That is how the *vegetalistas* (plant healers) know they can use them and how to use them to heal the sick".

It also happens that in the case of some illnesses, such as poisoning caused by the bite of a poisonous snake, it is not only poison that can kill a person, but also the *ánima* of the snake, introduced at the time of the bite. In the native vision it is not enough to remove the poison or take the respective remedy against the bite – as the antiophidic serum may be – the *ánima* of the snake must also be removed – what they call the "*virote*" (which can be translated as poisonous dart) – for the patient to heal. As indicated by Don Miguel Tapullima: "The *virote* cannot be removed in the hospital, only the one who knows can remove it. That is the *ánima*, the *supay* (devil) of the snake. The poison

is returned to the snake, and its ánima, once freed, heals the sick."

Healers say, "if the ánima loves you, it heals you." It is not a matter of taking a plant and waiting for the healing to occur. The ánima of the plant has to come together with the ánima or ánimas of the human. **It is the fondness, the affection that heals**, but also the harmony between the temperatures of the body and that of the plants.

Healing is the reunion, the healthy reincorporation of the human in nature from which it originates. That is why the purgatives should be done in a healthy forest. "Our body, when we take the purgative and follow the diet, is a forest. Our body goes into a forest. No animal can see you because you are a forest", says Purificación Cachique. The distinction between humans and nature fades away, giving way to a relationship where everyone is nature. To do this, the diet is a key aspect in healing. About the diet, Rodríguez and Bartra (3) say the following:

The term diet does not only refer to the practice of a special eating plan, but may also involve reducing physical effort (not to hunt, fish, build houses, etc.), isolation (non-participation in community work, festivities, assemblies, etc.), sexual abstinence and certain strict exercises (special baths). The diet can also mean not eating salt, nor sweets, butter or chilli. The only permitted foods are plant products, some bush meat and fish without fat, steamed, smoked or roasted in a bijao leaf. The dieter must leave his/her family home and stay in a tambito (guesthouse), isolated from the community and accompanied only by the healer. In general, during the diet, roasted bananas and boiled yuca (pango), without seasoning or dressing are consumed.

Growing medicinal plants

The medicines, as the Quechua lamas call them, fall into two groups. Some are mild medicines and others are so-called strong purgatives. They are grown differently. While the mild can be grown in the vicinity of the house and on the fields, and can be seen by friends and strangers, the strong ones are grown hidden in the dense forest. They cannot be seen but by the owners of the fields or the healers. There are also other groups. For example, there are water medicines and mountain medicines, each requiring particular care and use by the human community. The same plant can be regarded from both angles and its application depends on the source of the sickness.

Whether growing the so-called mild medications or the ones with strong purgative qualities, empathy must exist between the cycles of the runas (humans) and plants. It is known that when women are menstruating, they are at a moment of renewing life, and in those circumstances, they do not take strong purgatives nor do they have contact with these plants. Everyone raises and is raised by the corresponding plant. The growing of medicinal plants that cumulates in their use in ritual is an act of profound equivalence and a return to nature by the human being.

The health of human communities, the forest and souls

Jonah Ramirez, chacarero of Lamas says: "The ánimas care for the trees. When they are cut or sliced their souls weep, and crying they depart. The village close by loses strength. **When trees are felled, souls leave and people get sick more often.** If we sowed, replanted, the souls would remain."

In this local view **healing is holistic.** A human community can hardly be healthy if nature is weakened, and the presence of the ánimas is reduced. The harmony of one is inseparable from keeping the whole in harmony. Conversely, if one of the elements (runas, mountain or forest and

ánimas) is sick, balance is weakened and eventually destroyed, causing illness to the group.

For the native Quechua-lamas, their entire microcosm revolves around healing. All communities are part of the wellbeing of each person. Separated, healing is not worth it. Ánimas must also be healthy. The ánimas are healthy and present when the mountain, the forest is healthy. A community without a forest or a mountain is a sick community, a community without ánimas. For healing to take place, three communities must be in tune and caring for each other: sachá (forest or mountain), runas (human) and ánimas. This encounter between these three communities gives birth to the ritual of ingesting medicinal plants that is usually conducted by vegetalistas or plant healers.

In this sense, the territory of the Quechua-lamas, at least the one located in the province of Lamas, does not enjoy good health. The mountain has been the subject of a pitiless vexation, an ongoing situation. It is estimated that each year 4,543 hectares of primary forest are destroyed in the province of Lamas. Along with the forest and its diversity, the livelihood base of humans and animals disappears too. Consequently, as argued by Jonah, the Quechua-lamas people lose vigour, strength and stamina.

There are reactions, such as that of Doña Cerfina Isuiza, who believes that, "Much of the forest was taken down for cotton but we quickly realized that we could not have everything. It is not our interest to have a big field; a small one is enough to care for with joy, and it gives you everything." For Doña Cerfina, a significant and diverse production depends on the love and affection with which the field is cared for rather than its size. However, the market has won over the mentality of many people. And that is where the forest difficulties begin. **Successive campaigns to plant monocultures have had a devastating effect on mountains, forests, ánimas and the same human community** who did not find the wealth that its promoters offered.

Many know the teachings of Omer Ruiz, for whom "Without the forest, the field suffers." The complete field does not have to be seen as antagonistic to the forest, but as a complement. A traditional Quechua-lamas field has always been a recreation of the architecture of the forest. The breakdown occurs with specialized agriculture oriented exclusively towards the market. This agriculture sees the forest as an enemy to overcome. Subsequently, acute deforestation will continue to occur until all the forested area is occupied by monocultures. The teachings of Doña Cerfina prevail: recover the love for the forest to regenerate the lost harmony.

With the forest and its conservation, all life is regenerated. There is more water, more medicinal plants, more animals and more diversity in agriculture. In native communities such as Quechua-lamas, where fields and forest are a unit, the health of one is intrinsic to the other. Therefore, to take care of the agricultural diversity of the fields is also a way of raising the forest, and preserving the forest is another way of cultivating human life and the spiritual health of the planet.

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(1) This work is based mainly but not solely on testimonies from the book Montes y Montaraces. Pratec. Lima, Feb. 2001, wrote by the author of this essay together with Rider Panduro in 2001.

(2) Considered as a "forest guard", this character inspires respect and fear to locals and outsiders. It presents itself generally to those who walk alone along the forest paths.

(3) Rodríguez de la Matta, S. and Bartra Rengifo, J. Shapshico. Supersticiones, "Creencias y Presagios. Cultura popular de San Martín". Shuansho ediciones. Tarapoto. 1997.

