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American Anthropologist

Planting the Future

José Lopez Sanchez



Introduction, translation, and adaptation from oral to written form:

Silvia Mesturini & Emilia Sanabria

For José Lopez Sanchez, a Shipibo Onaya (One Who Knows) who runs a Shipibo healing center (Shipibo Rao) in the Ucayali region of Peru, the future is something that you plant now. In October 2021, we (Silvia Mesturini and Emilia Sanabria) spent time with him and his team in Shipibo Rao in view of defining the terms of a research collaboration. During this time, José Lopez Sanchez played with the analogies of Shipibo Rao being both something like a hospital and somehow a school. He imagined how his center could work as a place of learning for contemporary local youth as for future generations. Currently, Shipibo Rao functions as a plant medicine retreat center and mainly hosts foreigners who travel to Peru to do plant *Dieta*. *Dieta* is a term that exceeds any clear definition (De la Cadena, 2021) but conveys a combination of healing and learning. Dev (2020, ix) defines *samati* (to do *Dieta* in Shipibo) as follows: “Healers use dieting practices, consisting of periods of fasting and deprivation, to learn from



teacher plants (or other material or spiritual entities).” She describes *Dieta* as a practice of “learning to learn from plants” (Dev, 2020, xviii)¹.

Could the infrastructure of Shipibo Rao offer local youth a space to learn and grow? Where they, too, could do *Dieta*? Would this encourage members of his community to return to the ancient art of learning, knowing, and growing with plants? Currently, he explains, Shipibo communities are navigating a complex moment in which the presence of Evangelical churches has created intracommunity tensions between the “old” ways and contemporary

¹ Practically, doing *Dieta* often implies isolation and food and behavioral restrictions that may vary from one *Dieta* frame to another. Nevertheless, it is most common to avoid pork and red meats, salt and sugar, and fatty or spicy foods. Alcohol is strictly forbidden. Sexual activity is the main behavioral restriction. *Dieta* has recently been mentioned in ethnopharmacological and ethnobotanical studies (Sanz-Biset and Cañigüeral, 2011; Jernigan, 2011). While the plants are carefully studied, the practice itself is often loosely defined as an initiation practice involving isolation and restrictions on food and behavior. Some recent studies focus on the practice itself (Juaregui et al., 2011; O’Shaughnessy and Berlowitz, 2021), addressing Indigenous perspectives, interspecies (human-plant) communication, and the current commercialization of *Dieta* for a foreign audience (Dev 2018, 2020).

Shipibo aspirations toward modernity. Likewise, he notes, Western educational models are often more valued than traditional Shipibo pedagogical practices. Could a space be created where the aspirations of local youth (which might include access to good-quality educational materials, English classes, and guitar lessons, he dreams) would be met without cutting them off from their Shipibo roots? *Onaya*² phytopractices are apprehended with a fair degree of contempt locally but are highly prized by foreigners. How could local realities and international support encounter?

José's dream anticipates the future within an understanding of time as simultaneous rather than linear. Grace Dillon (2012) names this simultaneous time the "native slipstream." The future that José calls upon is fully situated in the present. The future, in a sense, is located in the practice of doing *Dieta*. Doing *Dieta* in the way he envisages, in dedicated and resourced facilities, is an emergent practice, it enables an actualization of Shipibo roots, in new conditions, integrating selected elements from foreign culture and protecting what needs to be transmitted to future generations. What he wants to pass on to the next generation is the know-how that is generated by doing *Dieta* with *Rao*. *Rao*, in Shipibo, can be used to refer to plants, trees, and vines. These very different kinds of beings carry the same name because they know how to teach and heal, as José explains. In Shipibo, there isn't a generic term for "plants," and the Spanish *plantas* is used to refer to those plants that aren't trees and aren't vines and to the common biological general category. They are most often translated as "master plants" by foreigners, yet they exceed what foreigners normally understand as "plants."

José's central concern is that the Elders' *Dietas*, the knowledge they have accrued over their lives of doing *Dieta*, are not being transmitted to Shipibo youth. In this way, he is afraid that *Onaya* and *Yobe* may disappear. For him, planting a livable future entails ensuring that the knowledge necessary for a few good *Onaya* or *Yobe* to come up in the world is passed on. Reflecting on our conversations with José about the sense of urgency and concern that the pandemic and the climate crisis have given rise to, we note a deliberate and astute reframing of "gringo" short-term solutionism. It was in the wake of one such conversation, and reflection on the end-of-the-world sentiment that he sees gringos as often harboring, that José spoke of how to plant a future, in the form we present below. This vision pitches the long-term care and labor of making *Dieta* available to local youth, such that this phyto-informed-knowing-with-the-world can take root and endure, struck as a potent form of futuring.

The Amazonian child has a great deal of power
In how to hunt
In how to fish
In how to harvest
In how to sow seeds.
Knower of the healing properties of each plant
Knower of the power of water

² The terms *Onanya* (the one who knows), *Meraya* (the one who finds), and *Yobe* (the one who confronts darkness) appear in José Lopez Sanchez's text, below. These terms refer to different specializations and/or amounts and depths of *Dietas* one has been through. José Lopez Sanchez defines himself as an *Onanya*.

Knower of the power of fire
Of what fire is
Of what air is
Of what earth is
Of the center in which Earth is
That is, of the power and the love that the Earth gives us

You could sit them both down, the Amazonian child and the Western child
to see the differences between them
And you would see that these earthlings are really quite different,
That is, different in their shape, in their pattern
Why is this? You may ask

Because the Western child, the child of politicians
Grows up with a mentality that is supposedly good for the people
Who knows how to manage super-advanced technologies,
But maybe it is the technologies that manage us?
The orders that are behind them

We can start with the watch: at this hour you eat
Then numbers: the years one "has"
All the years of formal education, primary and secondary . . .
Whether you like it or not, you, too, are programmed in this technological life
There is something, an order that you obey, from above
Or perhaps from below
I don't know from where
But we become that, we take that on
And all this is very much in the mental realm

This is what makes you disconnect from respecting *Rao*
From respecting and loving the Earth
The place where we live step, run, eat

For we do not eat from computers
We do not eat from science
We do not eat from pharmacology
Or from psychiatry
From anything that ends in *-ology*

Obviously, we are all human in our physical appearance
But the mental part is different
The mental part plays a very important role in this process of disconnection
Of separation of the heart from the mind
And this, we do ourselves

The future development of our children depends on our actions
On how we sow these seeds
But also, first, how we were sown

That is, how we were sown and how we care for the fruits we were given
For these little leaves, in all their beauty
But if we, ourselves, to not care for ourselves
If we do not care for the territory that we are, if we leave it unkept
Full of spider webs and weeds
How will we sow something beautiful that can grow healthily?
A successful graft
A sweet fruit, like when a mango falls, ripe, to the ground
and you eat it

We, Shipibo Onayas, still have these techniques
And these *plantas*
Plantas to cleanse
Plantas to do deep cleansing work
And not only personal cleansing, but work that facilitates the well-being of others

There are very few *Ancianos* left now
Like my mother
Those who have a large, deep, and wide knowledge
And if they leave, we will be left without this knowledge

We can share their life stories
But it is an entirely different thing to receive the strength of a *Dieta* from a wise *Anciano.a* of this calibre
To receive a *Dieta*
That teaches you a lot
To receive a *Dieta* from someone who has practiced for seventy years
Taking medicine
Doing *Dieta*

That is why I dream of a place where our youth could do *Dieta*
Because these *Dietas* are very delicate
Children need a proper space to learn
Where they are fed the proper food
Things that my generation, who did our *Dietas* in the city, did not have
Because of economic difficulties
In such a place, young Shipibo children would have the things that were lacking in the past

Like a good quality pen
Good paper
Like a musical instrument
Maybe a guitar
Or even a professor to teach you guitar
An English teacher
To keep them busy
That would be a fabulous way for our youth to do *Dieta*
So that they have a broad education, a good quality education
So that they don't suffer from ignorance

Before it was

- You want to do *Dieta*?
- Build your camp
- Go there into the forest

And you would be there alone

And there were jaguars

And you would be scared

If the *Tunche* (malevolent spirit) appeared, worst!

If you did not fish, you did not eat

And that is when you would want to abandon your *Dieta*

But in the olden days, the time of the *Meraya*, it was different

The Dieter was there, doing *Dieta*

And the whole community, every family, each morning and each evening

Would bring their best fish to the Dieter

For the *Onaya*, the *Meraya*, the *Yobe*

Fish, banana, whatever they were allowed to eat

And they would leave it there for them on a little *mesita*, near the camp

All served and ready

But this ended

Today if you don't plant a garden, and if there is no money, you don't eat

And when the churches came

Then it became very difficult

Nobody would bring you food

Worst: they gave you dirty looks

Called you a witch, *brujo*

They bullied you

In the past, *Onayas* were respected

Welcomed, greeted

It was as if a young Shipibo studying medicine in Oxford

Returned to Pucallpa and everybody would come to greet them from the airport,
to receive them

"How wonderful that they are studying in the best university in the world"

Today it's only diplomas that are valued

And the one doing *Dieta* is seen as *loco* (crazy)

Or as wasting their time

Or as doing it to cheat *gringos*

And this is what is most embarrassing and sad

I sit and think of the world I am placing my children in

Would it be better for them to have diplomas rather than be *brujos*?

The life I live: is this what I want for my children?

In this community? In this society?

They will not be valued, as *Onayas*, by my own people

Only those who are on this path give it value
Some *gringos* too
But if our children learn well, learn deeply
If there were at least two or three or four who truly learn with the *plantas*
So that this knowledge does not end
“They will know a new generation, people with another mentality”
And it can be a different kind of power than fighting among themselves
Maybe it will even be possible to unite knowledges
In an Indigenous world
In Amazonia
And not just Amazonia,
I’m thinking of the Huni Kuin, the Ese Eja, I’m thinking of Colombia, I’m thinking of Ecuador

Imagining bringing together people with good knowledge
And the possibility of relating together without pettiness and misgivings
Imagining centers such as this, where one can invite guests
And be invited in return

What we have, sadly, is not valued here amongst many of my people
While the world outside values it
And hopefully, one day, my people will understand that this is worth a lot more

This knowledge creates
It gives strength
This is something that you sow
Something with huge strength
So that our children do not fall into the traps and tests
Of money
Of power

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