

*Underlying the intricate geometric patterns of great complexity displayed in the art of the Shipibo people is a concept of an all pervading magical reality which can challenge the Western linguistic heritage and rational mind.*



# COMMUNION WITH THE INFINITE



The visual music of the Shipibo people of the Amazon

HOWARD G. CHARING

*Above left:* Shipibo women (shipiba) in traditional dress gathered at Iquitos to show their craft and artisan work

*Above right:* Shipibo textile, a combination of embroidery and traditional painting with huito dyes on mahogany bark dyed white cotton

The Shipibo are one of the largest indigenous peoples in the Peruvian Amazon. These ethnic groups each have their own languages, traditions and culture. The Shipibo, who currently number about 20,000, are spread out in communities through the Pucallpa - Ucayali river region. They are highly regarded in the Amazon as being masters of the hallucinogenic vine, Ayahuasca, and many aspiring shamans and Ayahuasqueros from the region study with the Shipibo to learn their language, chants, and plant medicine knowledge.

In their visionary art the Shipibo create complex geometric patterns which convey an all pervading magical reality which can challenge the Western linguistic heritage and rational mind. These intricate patterns are more than an expression of the one-ness of Creation, the inter-changeability of light and sound, or the union of perceived opposites. They are an

ongoing dialogue or communion with the spiritual world and powers of the Rainforest. Their art forms bring this paradigm into a physical form. The Ethnologist Angelika Gebhart-Sayer, calls this 'visual music'.

### *Initiated women*

All the textile painting, embroidery, and artisan craft is carried out by the women. From a young age the Shipibo females are initiated by their mothers and grandmothers into this practice. Teresa, a Shipiba who works with us on our Amazon Retreats, tells that "when I was a young girl, my mother squeezed drops of the piripiri (a species of cyperus sp.) berries into my eyes so that I would have the vision for the designs. This is only done once and lasts a lifetime".

The intricate designs have their origin in the non-manifest and ineffable world within the spirit of the Rainforest and all who live there. They are a representation of

the Cosmic Serpent, the Anaconda, the great Mother, Creator of the universe called Ronin. For the Shipibo the skin of Ronin has a radiating, electrifying vibration of light, colour, sound, movement and is the embodiment of all possible patterns and designs past, present, and future.

The designs that the Shipibo paint are channels or conduits for this multi-sensorial vibrational fusion of form, light and sound. Although in our cultural paradigm we perceive that the geometric patterns are bound within the border of the textile or ceramic vessel, to the Shipibo the patterns extend far beyond these borders and permeate the entire world.

### Painting music

One of the challenges for the Western mind, is to acknowledge the relationship between these designs and music. For the Shipibo can 'listen' to a song or chant by looking at the designs - and inversely, paint a pattern by listening to a song or music.

As an astonishing demonstration of this I witnessed two Shipibo paint a large ceremonial ceramic pot known as a mahuetá. The pot was nearly five feet high and had a diameter of about three feet. Neither could see what the other was painting, yet both were whistling the same song. When they had finished both

sides of the complex geometric pattern were identical and matched each side perfectly.

The Shipibo designs are traditionally carried out on natural un-dyed cotton - which they often grow themselves - or on cotton dyed in mahogany bark (usually three or four times) which gives the distinctive brown colour.

They paint using either a pointed piece of chonta (bamboo), or an iron nail, with the juice of the crushed huito berry fruits (genipa americana) which turns into a blue- brown-black dye once exposed to air.

Each of the designs are unique, even the very small pieces, and they cannot be commercially or mass produced. In Lima I met with a woman who had set up a government-funded community project which, amongst other matters, established a collective for the Shipibo to sell their artisan work and paintings. She tells that a major USA corporation (Pier 1



Left: traditional embroidered Shipibo textile bag

Imports), enamoured by these designs, ordered via the project twenty thousand textiles with the same design. This order could never be fulfilled - the Shipibo simply couldn't comprehend the concept of replicating identical designs.

### Singing the patterns of healing

The Shipibo believe that our state of health, both physical and psychological, is dependent on the

Below: a traditional Shipibo chupa on mahogany dyed cotton painted with huito dye. The designs at the edge of the textile represent the sacred Anaconda





Above: typical Shipibo painted ceramic bowl

shaman the luminous geometric patterns of energy. These filaments drift towards the mouth of the shaman where they metamorphose into a chant or icaro. The icaro is a conduit for the patterns of Creation, which then permeate the body of the shaman's patient, bringing harmony in the form of the geometric patterns which re-balance the patient's body.

balanced union between mind, spirit and body. If an imbalance in this occurs - such as through emotions of envy, hate, anger - this will generate a negative effect on the health of that person.

The shaman will re-establish the balance by chanting the icaros, which are the geometric patterns of harmony made manifest in sound, into the body of the person. The shaman in effect transforms the visual code into an acoustic code.

A key element in this magical dialogue with the energy which permeates Creation and is embedded in the Shipibo designs, is the work with ayahuasca by the Shipibo shamans or muraya.

In the deep ayahuasca trance, the ayahuasca reveals to the

The vocal range of the Shipibo shamans when they chant the icaros is astonishing; they can range from the highest falsetto one moment to a sound which resembles a thumping pile driver, and then to a gentle soothing melodic lullaby. Speaking personally of my experience of this, it produced a feeling as if every cell in my body was floating and embraced in a nurturing all-encompassing vibration, even the air around me was vibrating in acoustic resonance with the icaro of the maestro.

The shaman knows when the healing is complete, as the design is clearly distinct in the patient's body. It make take a few sessions to complete this, and when completed the geometric healing designs are embedded in the patient's body, this is called an

arkana This internal patterning is deemed to be permanent and to protect a person's spirit.

Angelika Gebhart-Sayer, Professor of Ethnology, University of Marburg writes that 'Essentially, Shipibo-Conibo therapy is a matter of visionary design application in connection with aura restoration; the shaman heals his patient through the application of a visionary design, every person feels spiritually permeated and saturated with designs. The shaman heals his patient through the application of the song-design, which saturates the patients' body and is believed to untangle distorted physical and psycho-spiritual energies, restoring harmony to the somatic, psychic and spiritual systems of the patient. The designs are permanent and remain with a person's spirit even after death.'

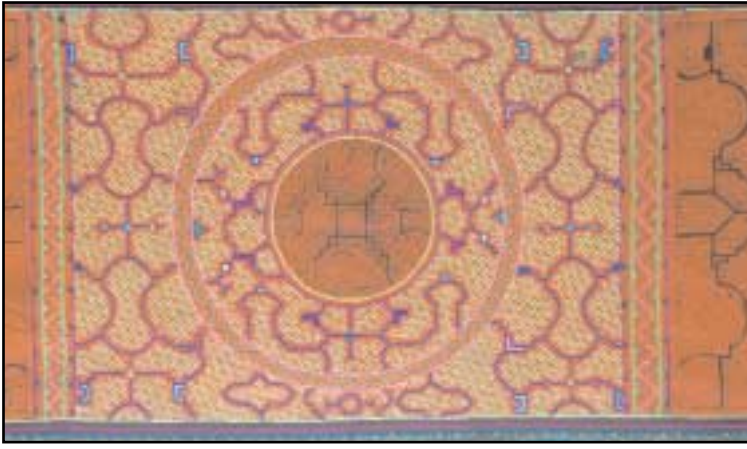
Whilst it is not easy for Westerners to enter and engage with the world view of the Shipibo, which has been developed far away from



Right: Teresa, the Shipibo craftswoman who helps the author when he takes groups to visit the Shipibo. She is painting onto white cotton with huito dye using a steel nail as a brush

Inset: The wife and daughter of the shaman, maestro Benjamin. She is wearing a traditionally patterned, painted fabric dress.



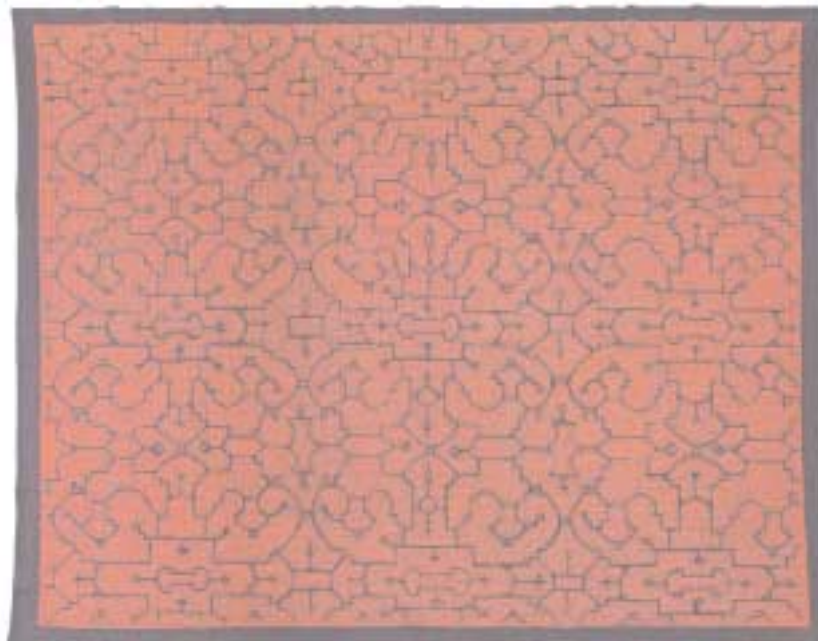


our linguistic structures and psychological models, there is an underlying sophisticated and complex symbolic language embedded in these geometric patterns.

The main figures in the Shipibo designs are the square, the rhombus, the octagon, and the cross. The symmetry of the patterns emanating from the centre (which is our world) is a representation of the outer and inner worlds, a map of the Cosmos. The cross represents the Southern Cross constellation which dominates the night sky and divides the cosmos into four quadrants, the intersection of the arms of the cross is the centre of the

universe, and becomes the Cosmic Cross. The Cosmic Cross represents the eternal spirit of a person and the union of the masculine and feminine principles - the very cycle of life and death - which reminds us of the great act of procreation of not only the universe, but also of humanity, and our individual selves.

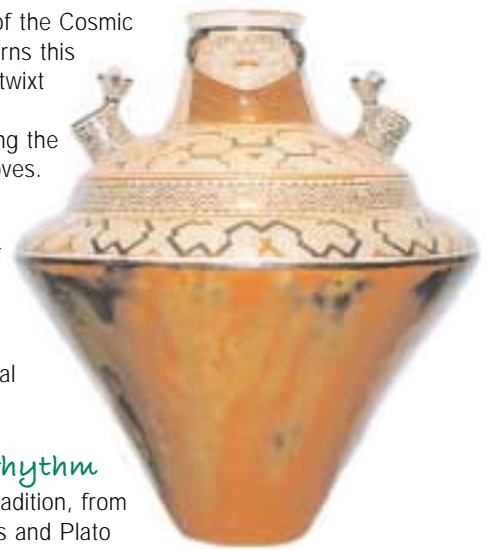
The smaller, flowing patterns within the geometric forms are the



**Above: Shipibo textiles.** The one at the top of the page shows the cosmic cross within the circle of the Anaconda

**Right: Painted Shipibo textile.** As with all Shipibo paintings, they start in the centre and the pattern moves out from this point. The cosmic cross is again at the centre

radiating power of the Cosmic Serpent which turns this way and that, betwixt and between, constantly creating the universe as it moves. The circles are often a direct representation of the Cosmic Anaconda, and within the circle itself is the central point of creation.



### The primal rhythm

In the Western tradition, from the Pythagoreans and Plato through to the Renaissance, music was used to heal the body and to elevate the soul. It was also believed that earthly music was no more than a faint echo of the universal 'harmony of the spheres'. This view of the harmony of the universe was held both by artists and scientists until the mechanistic universe of Newton.

Joseph Campbell, perhaps the foremost scholar of mythology, suggested that there is a universe of harmonic vibrations which the human collective unconscious has always been in communion with.

Our beings beat to the ancient rhythms of the Cosmos. The traditional ways of the Shipibo and other indigenous peoples still reflect this primal rhythm, and their perception of the universal forces made physical is truly a communion with the infinite.

**Above: Shipibo ceremonial pot or Mahuetá**



HOWARD G. CHARING has organised journeys to the Amazon Rainforest for the past seven years to work with the ayahuasca shamans and the sacred 'jungle doctors' (healing and visionary plants) of this area. He has written numerous articles about the Amazonian plant medicines, and has worked with some of the most respected shamans in the region. He was baptised into their tribe by the Shipibo Indians in the Amazon. If you would like to discover more about this work, he conducts Plant Spirit Medicine journeys to the Amazon Rainforest working with the Shipibo people.

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