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## *Nixi pae* and its transcendental connection: An ethnographic essay on ayahuasca rituals in a Huni Kuin community in Brazil

### The arrival

The journey was long, with the river moving slowly and darkly beneath a bright blue sky. After departing from Manoel Urbano, a municipality in the Brazilian state of Acre, it took us three days by boat to reach the Huni Kuin indigenous community, in the heart of the Amazon rainforest. The boat was narrow and tiny, yet it accommodated all of us. We can still vividly recall the feeling of the warm water running through our fingers and the refreshing breeze against our skin. We were told there would be a celebration upon our arrival – a traditional Huni Kuin welcoming. The thought filled us with excitement and honour. It felt like a privilege to witness something so traditional and at the same time so intimate. We became their guests for ten unforgettable days, participating in a profound three-day ayahuasca ceremony led by the indigenous community.

This ethnographic essay presents an immersive experience of drinking ayahuasca among the Huni Kuin in their territory in the Brazilian Amazon in 2020,

focusing, according to this community's cosmology, on its healing purposes and its transcendent role in fostering intimate connections with spirituality. We write from distinct yet interconnected positionalities and employing a shared collaborative decolonial approach, reflected in having as co-author a male Huni Kuin shaman apprentice and *curandeiro* (healer), together with a female family physician, and a male researcher, all from the Global South, specifically Brazil. All three of us have lived in the Brazilian Amazon and participated in ayahuasca rituals in this region, with the second author remaining based in the Amazon.

Our decolonial perspective goes beyond merely studying an indigenous community; instead, we engage in thinking *with* and *from* (Walsh 2018) the perspectives of the Huni Kuin people. The narrative interweaves the first author's experiences in ayahuasca ceremonies within the community with the second author's embodied knowledge as a Huni Kuin *curandeiro* who employs ayahuasca in healing practices. Through a collaborative reflective process, we explore ayahuasca's healing potential, that centres Huni Kuin ways of knowing, being and healing.

## Ayahuasca rituals among the Huni Kuin people

The term "ayahuasca" originates from the Quechua language, with "huasca" meaning vine and "aya" signifying spirits or souls, creating the evocative translation "vine of the souls/spirits." The origins of ayahuasca, also known as *nixi pae* by the Huni Kuin people, are steeped in myths. In Huni Kuin, *nixi* means "thread," and *pae* translates to "enchantment." The Huni Kuin, translated as the "real people," live in the Amazon rainforest between Brazil and Peru. They speak Hãtxa Kuin, a language belonging to the Pano-Tacana linguistic family (Amaral 2014). Nearly 12,000 individuals of this ethnic group reside in the state of Acre (Lagrou 2023). The Huni Kuin community described in this text is part of the Alto Rio Purus Indigenous Land. Officially recognized in 1996, this territory spans 263,000 hectares and is home to 3,144 people belonging to three indigenous groups: the Huni Kuin (also known as Kaxinawá), the Kulina, and the Yaminawá (Lagrou 2023).

Ayahuasca is a psychoactive indigenous brew prepared by boiling the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine with the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* shrub, both found in the Amazon rainforest (Assis, Rodrigues 2017). It is exclusively used in rituals, accompanied by music, for physical and spiritual healing for the community (Pacheco 2014). In Brazil, the use of ayahuasca is legally permitted for ceremonial purposes. Two fundamental narrative structures are often associated with ayahuasca. One recounts the story of a man who falls in love with a *sucuri*-woman (boa constrictor) and ventures to live with her in the underwater realm. The other describes how a village's inhabitants ascended to the sky through the intensive use of a particular vine grown from the decomposing body of their shaman (Matos 2022). These myths emphasize a transformative shift in human perspective, in which individuals, typically hunters, experience being hunted. This role reversal allows hunters to understand the complexity of their actions and their

interconnectedness with their environment and the spiritual world. Such narratives reinforce the integration of beings, their ecosystems, and the spiritual realm, fostering a profound change in perception and deeper comprehension of reality for the benefit of the entire ecosystem (Matos 2022).

Traditionally, Huni Kuin ayahuasca ceremonies were conducted for hunters. According to their cosmology, illness in a hunter represents the animal's *yuxin*, a spiritual essence, retaliating against the hunter's body (Goulart 2023). The *yuxin* animates matter and embodies the inseparability of body and soul, connecting all beings and realms of existence (Ribeiro 2014). During the ceremonies, the hunters can see through the animal's *yuxin* perspective and acknowledge the aggression they experienced. Ritual songs symbolize the revenge of the hunted, facilitating their healing. Nowadays, ayahuasca is consumed not only by the indigenous hunters, but also by other men, women, children, and elderly. It serves purposes of physical and spiritual healing, mental clarity, reveals feelings and sensations, warns about future events through visions, enables issues to be resolved, and plays a fundamental role in shaping their social and cultural identity (Ribeiro 2014).

These ceremonies share common aspects and recurring elements, prominently featuring shamanic chants as integral components of their rituals (Goulart 2023). As noted by Els Lagrou (2018), *nixi pae* ceremonies follow a sequence of songs: initiating with the "calling songs," followed by the "stabilizing" songs, proceeding to the "songs to see," and concluding with the "songs to send away." This sequence is not strictly linear, reflecting a "fractal" logic where all elements may be present within a single song, with emphasis shifting based on the ritual's stage. Barbara Keifenheim highlights phases of ayahuasca-induced experiences, from geometric to figurative visions, with auditory perceptions gradually transforming into visual imagery. As the brew's effects deepen, participants report anthropomorphic and transformative visions that blur the boundaries of ordinary perception. She also reaffirms that songs are central to this process, guiding and catalysing visions, and symbolically rescuing participants from "devouring forces" encountered in altered states (qtd. in: Ribeiro 2014).

Ayahuasca is also often linked to the snake's urine or blood, with *yube* representing its spirit, according to Huni Kuin cosmology (Goulart 2023). *Yube*'s significance lies in its role as a custodian of essential knowledge, transmitted through various means, including ayahuasca visions and *kene* – intricate geometric patterns. These patterns, traditionally passed down to women, are replicated in handicrafts and adornments. Regarded as the "real writing" (*kene kuin*), these designs serve as a symbolic language of the spirits (Goulart 2023).

## Experiencing ayahuasca ceremonies in a Huni Kuin community

It was afternoon when we arrived at the Huni Kuin community. From the boat, we could see the village, framed by a stunning sunset in shades of pink and orange, that contrasted beautifully with the blue sky. Many members of the community

were gathered to welcome us, and it was a big celebration. They wore intricate coconut leaf gowns, colourful native headdresses, and beautiful body paintings. Their warm hugs felt like those of close family, and they ran through the fields toward their longhouse, dancing and inviting us to join the festivity they had carefully prepared. A central table was laden with their traditional dishes, such as cassava, banana, meat and beverages, including a drink made of banana and peanut. Some played the guitar, while others performed on percussion instruments. The rhythm and melody seemed to seep into our blood cells, urging us to dance in circles and hold their hands. Their chants and songs were celebratory, filling us with joy. The mosquitos were also very fond of us.

After this heartfelt reception, we were introduced to the community and its facilities. Each family lives in a separate wooden house, but they share communal spaces, including schools, basic health units, soccer fields, and their longhouses – open circular structures made of palm leaves and timber, used for daily activities and festivities. The bathrooms consist of outdoor holes surrounded by wooden walls, while the community bathes in the river on a wooden deck built near the flowing water. At night, we hung our hammocks on an outdoor deck, preparing to experience something far beyond our expectations.

We were invited to participate in the preparations for a three-day ritual. Community members guided us in identifying the ingredients needed to prepare ayahuasca, also known as *nixi pae*, teaching us how to differentiate the essential plants from other Amazonian herbs. Our group was tasked with collecting fragments of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* shrub. Cutting through the thick vine was challenging. Once gathered, the ingredients were boiled for hours to create the dark brew. During the process, the Huni Kuin chanted and danced around the boiling pot, and as the smoke rose, it was astonishing to witness this ritual.

Before the ritual began, the eldest resident of the community shared the myth of ayahuasca's origin. The tale spoke of an indigenous man who encountered a snake-woman by a river and became enchanted. He left his human family to live with her in a submerged world, where he learned about *nixi pae*. However, after defying the rule not to drink ayahuasca, he experienced vivid terrifying visions and fled back to his human family, and eventually ended up being killed by the snakes from the river, as in his ayahuasca vision. While a snake swallowed his legs, he was screaming for help. His human family ran to save him, but it was too late. They managed to scare off the snakes, but his death was imminent. As his final wish, he requested to be buried, stating that from his body would grow a vine and leaves that would create a unique drink. Those who consumed it would gain visions of the past, present, and future.

As the three-day ritual commenced, we gathered in the longhouse at dusk, under the glow of the moon and surrounded by the vast rainforest. The breeze was cold, and we sat on the ground near a large bonfire. The shamans led the ceremony, playing guitars and percussion instruments while chanting. The whole community participated, including the children, spread out on hammocks and sleeping

mattresses. The residents of the community explained that ayahuasca rituals are held regularly, each serving a distinct purpose. Some are intended to enhance hunters' skills, others to heal the sick, including counteracting spells of poisoning. Some rituals aim to increase awareness of one's surroundings or to test the intentions of relatives and strangers, while others are conducted for celebration and special festivities.

We were also invited to use rapé, a blend of powdered medicinal plants and tobacco, that was blown into our nostrils, leading us to a meditative state. Later in the ceremony, the shamans invited the young men to use a different, stronger type of rapé, to test their strength and resilience and clean their energies. Although nowadays women are not excluded from this custom, in this community only men were invited. Almost immediately after using the stronger rapé, some fell on the ground and began vomiting. They were carefully attended to by the women of the community until they felt better. Later, we were invited to drink ayahuasca. The shamans would pour the amount of a teacup and wish a good journey to all those who were drinking it. The shamans conducting the ceremony were singing, playing the guitar and percussion instruments. It was beautiful and very powerful, as we felt the *nixi pae* inside us being activated by their music.

As I sat down in silence for a moment, the first symptoms appeared, mostly somatic, with nausea, dizziness, and shiver. I had vivid visions of colourful snakes when I closed my eyes, which would quickly vanish as I opened them. I caught glimpses of my past, present, and moments involving my friends and family. I also envisioned myself as inhabiting different places and cultures worldwide in different temporalities and bodies. Additionally, I saw images of what seemed to be my future self. During the ceremony, I was aware of my surroundings, the hot air from the fire, the sounds of the forest, the smell of the grass and leaves and the lights from the stars. I felt an awareness that my being was much larger than my physical body (First author's fieldnotes).

On the third and final day of the ceremony, the first author's somatic symptoms after drinking ayahuasca were intense, which is considered part of the cleansing process. As she describes it,

I felt extreme nausea, experienced vomiting, and had diarrhoea. Once again, the vivid patterns of colourful snakes emerged, dancing through my mind in harmony with the shaman's music. I had the perception of the presence of spirits beside me, presenting themselves as entities from the forest. At one point, I felt that my body was very small, as if my soul was too large to fit in this material dimension. The effects of ayahuasca took some time to wear off. It was morning and my consciousness had not yet returned to its usual state. I began to feel anxious and sought help from my indigenous friend. She took an indigenous rattle, called *maracá*, and began to pray and sing. Then, she drank a cup of water and spat it over my head and face. I immediately sensed the effects ceasing and returned to consciousness (First author's fieldnotes).

Over the three days, the music – sang in Huni Kuin language – was an indispensable tool for the shamans leading the ceremonies, having distinct effects on us. With some songs, the snake-like or geometrical patterns appeared more vividly, while with others the somatic sensations intensified. There seemed to be a deliberate order orchestrated by the shamans: the process often began with physical symptoms such as nausea, abdominal discomfort, and purging, followed by visions of colourful geometric patterns, and culminating in profound revelations and insights about personal matters.

On the second day, the preparatory ritual closely resembled the first. As night approached, we gathered once more in the main longhouse of the community. A bonfire was lit in the centre of the space, and hammocks and mattresses were arranged around it, providing places for people to lay down during the ceremony. The shamans played the guitar, percussion instruments, and chanted songs according to the ritual's different stages. The first author was invited by the shamans to assist, given her background as a physician, alongside her Huni Kuin friend who is a healer, in attending to participants during the ceremony. These participants – indigenous members of the community – sought the guidance and healing properties of ayahuasca. It is a common practice in the community to use *nixi pae* to uncover potential causes of illness, allowing the shamans to identify and address what is revealed during the ritual.

The first woman we attended to was crying and screaming after drinking ayahuasca, claiming to suffer from chronic insomnia and abdominal pain. Her vital signs were normal, and the physical examination of her abdomen revealed no signs of illness. My friend asked me to close my eyes, then blew rapé into my nostrils. I had the feeling and an intuition that she had experienced three miscarriages and that the spirit of the first child felt neglected and was seeking attention. I gently asked her if she had ever had a miscarriage, and she confirmed, saying, "Three. Two of them I miss dearly, but the other I don't think about it that much." I shared my intuition with her, and she decided to pray for the soul of the first child. Almost instantly her demeanour changed, and she felt noticeably better.

The next patient was a young indigenous man from the community, lying on a hammock and appearing deeply disturbed and withdrawn. He waited impatiently for the *nixi pae* to take effect. Once again, my friend administered rapé to me and asked, "What do you see?" After a moment, I told her I sensed he was using drugs, possibly cocaine. I asked him if he had been using drugs and he said, "Yes, cocaine." I was perplexed, because it was not obvious. He showed no outward signs of acute intoxication, yet the intuition had been clear. We spoke with him about his substance abuse and its effects on his relationships. His family, present during the ceremony, seemed both surprised and concerned by this revelation but committed to supporting him. They agreed, with his consent, to bring him to future ceremonies to address his addiction (First author's fieldnotes).



That night, everyone in the community seeking guidance or healing – including children – participated in the ceremony and drank ayahuasca. The first author's experience attending to these two community members was overwhelming, raising questions about what had transpired during the ceremony. How could she access such precise information about these two individuals without any prior knowledge on their lives and health? How was the woman who had suffered miscarriages suddenly relieved of her pain? What role did ayahuasca and rapé play in this healing process? While the possibility that this was merely a coincidence has crossed our minds – and might be in yours as well – the level of detail and accuracy in the information accessed suggests the need to acknowledge other epistemologies and ways of seeing and perceiving the world, such as Huni Kuin cosmology.

## Sprouting

According to the Huni Kuin shamans, ayahuasca serves as a key to the invisible world, with the shaman playing a pivotal role as the guardian of this key. They possess the authority and skills to open or close this gateway, facilitating communication with spirits and ancestors. These entities guide the shamans to other dimensions, sharing profound knowledge. During rituals, chants activate the plant's healing potential, functioning as codes of healing, with the shaman orchestrating the process as a maestro. Ayahuasca allows individuals to attain a heightened state of consciousness, bringing awareness to both their shadows and strengths. Resistance to its effects can make the experience more challenging, as the plant works to regulate, enhance, and amplify one's vibrations.

Rapé holds a significant place in both ayahuasca ceremonies and daily life among the Huni Kuin. It is a blend of dried, ground, and pounded tobacco mixed with various medicinal herbs, such as Cumaru and Uricuri (Dos Santos, Soares 2015). Its therapeutic potential is deeply tied to its ritualistic preparation and the shaman's intention, since he can read the energy field of those who seek him and direct the intention around this energetic adjustment. The substance is administered by blowing it into the nostrils using a *kuripe*, an instrument often crafted from bamboo and typically V-shaped. Rapé's effects include body relaxation, relief from headaches and allergies, and clearing of the airways, among other benefits. Among the Huni Kuin people, rapé is believed to facilitate a connection with the spiritual dimension and to promote an expanded state of consciousness. Both medicines, ayahuasca and rapé, are deeply interconnected within Huni Kuin practices, serving as bridges between different realms of existence and facilitating interactions with various entities inhabiting the spiritual landscape.

From the Huni Kuin perspective, what the first author initially perceived as intuition – suggesting that the woman's pain was linked to her three miscarriages, particularly the spirit of her first child – was, in fact, the result of her presence, alongside the woman receiving assistance and the shamans, in the spiritual

dimensions accessed through ayahuasca and rapé under the shamans' guidance. The ceremony enabled the first author to connect with the spirit of cure, which assisted in revealing the underlying cause of the indigenous woman's pain. A similar process took place regarding the revelation that the male indigenous seeking assistance was addicted to cocaine. As the second author states:

For those of us who work with healing practices, ayahuasca is a teacher, as it instructs in the manipulation of healing energies. During the ceremony, a dialogue is established between the healer and the ayahuasca present in the participant's body, allowing access to specific spaces that require cleansing, healing, and restoration. For the healer, ayahuasca functions as a passport: upon ingesting it, one experiences a transition to another dimension. Throughout the ceremony, the person's life is revealed like an open book, enabling the healer to guide and direct energies through chants, rapé blows, and prayers. This process facilitates intervention in specific aspects that require attention (Second author's fieldnotes).

As is also the case among other indigenous groups in the Amazon, the shaman mediates and navigates intersecting perspectives (Viveiros de Castro 2017), moving fluidly across different dimensions. Among the Huni Kuin, the shaman plays a crucial role in ayahuasca rituals, connecting material and spiritual realms, guiding participants into the spiritual world, and helping them develop their own ways of addressing and coping with personal challenges. The shaman uses ayahuasca as a metaphorical rope that participants hold onto while navigating a labyrinth, while the shaman remains outside, guiding them along their journey. This guidance is provided through chants, dialogue, prayers, and vibrations, all directed toward the participant's healing process.

There is a growing academic interest in ayahuasca's therapeutic potential in treating mental illness conditions such as depression and addiction, in which ayahuasca's healing properties is often associated with the presence of monoamine oxidase inhibitors in the brew, inhibiting the breakdown of *N,N*-dimethyltryptamine, inducing in the brain altered states of consciousness (Palhano-Fontes et al. 2019). While these studies are significant, they stem from a fundamentally different ontology than that of the Huni Kuin. From a Western positivist scientific perspective, ayahuasca's healing potential is primarily understood in terms of its chemical effects on the body. In contrast, for the Huni Kuin, its healing properties are intrinsically linked to a transcendental connection with spirituality, mediated by the shaman, a perspective that helps explain the cessation of the woman's abdominal pain. Within this cosmology, the distinctions between body, mind, and spirit is dissolved.

In Huni Kuin epistemology, healing through ayahuasca requires those seeking help to journey into another world in pursuit of uncovering answers to their questions. Ayahuasca is understood as a spiritual being, and its outcomes are not uniform across individuals. The healing process depends on various factors, including the preparation and intentions of the person drinking it, the way



the ceremony is conducted by the shaman, and the portals opened during this ritual. These elements impact the extent of the participants' connection with ayahuasca's healing powers. While a Western scientific framework attempts to comprehend ayahuasca by objectifying it, the Huni Kuin epistemology emphasizes its subjective dimension, recognizing ayahuasca as a holder of a spirit (*yuxin*), much like every living being in the cosmos.

Despite these differing ontological foundations, dialogue remains possible and, in fact, can be mutually enriching. However, such an exchange requires delinking from the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo 2007), which has historically silenced, inferiorized and delegitimized indigenous knowledge (Quijano 1992; 2000). A step in this direction involves adopting a decolonial perspective that recognizes the legitimacy of diverse epistemological spaces of enunciation (Mignolo 2015), such as the Huni Kuin people's knowledge of ayahuasca. This approach does not seek to invert hierarchies or replicate colonial logic in reverse, nor does it entail rejecting Western science and formal medicine outright. Instead, it aims to foster dialogical spaces that validate multiple epistemologies, including those that may not align with or be entirely comprehensible within Western theoretical framework, such as the insights revealed through ayahuasca ceremonies in the Huni Kuin community.

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## SUMMARY

*Nixi pae* and its transcendental connection:

An ethnographic essay on ayahuasca rituals in a Huni Kuin community in Brazil

The Huni Kuin people, inhabiting the Amazon rainforest in Brazil and Peru, have mastered the use of ayahuasca, which serves as a conduit bridging different realms of existence. Grounded in an immersive personal experience of participating in an ayahuasca ceremony, this paper explores ayahuasca rituals in a Huni Kuin community in the Brazilian state of Acre, focusing on their healing purposes and role in fostering intimate connections with spirituality, as situated within Huni Kuin cosmology. Writing from distinct yet interconnected positionalities, we adopt a collaborative decolonial approach that centres Huni Kuin ways of knowing, being, and healing.

**Keywords:** ayahuasca, Amazon, indigenous peoples, Amerindian, Huni Kuin, shamanism