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Facilitating *pura medicina*

Finnish mystical tourism and religious appropriation

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In this article, based on my doctoral research, I discuss the appropriation of religious elements from South America by Finnish ‘mystical tourists’. The plant medicine ceremonies are approached as spiritual commodities. Imagining local beliefs and practices as ancient cultural heritage, essentially and authentically spiritual, Finnish mystical tourists adapt these practices for their own therapeutic uses. They are accompanied by singing prayers to various plant spirits. Among the appropriated elements are the ceremonial ingestion of imported organic cacao, sacred tobacco and ayahuasca, as well as praying by singing to plant spirits understood in terms of animism. My findings indicate how the appropriated cultural elements are given therapeutic functions in collectively created musical and ritual spaces for individual well-being. I analyse appropriation in categories introduced by Richard A. Rogers (2006) and understand the ceremonies to provide ‘mystical tourists’ with a role as a racially privileged group over the subaltern indigenous peoples through processes of commercialization, where reimagined cultural elements become spiritual commodities to be bought and sold in commercial networks on the basis of access. I argue that the associated forms of cultural appropriation align with the individualistic spiritual well-being needs of the Finnish participants and are related to the theme of ‘sacralization of the self’.

Introduction

In this article, I discuss religious appropriation of South American and Central American religious elements by Finnish

‘mystical tourists’ within their ceremonial work, and their role in spiritual commercialization. It is based on my doctoral research and my fieldwork in religious studies (I am working on an ethnographic dissertation project on the role of music-making in contemporary spirituality and new religious movements in Finland). I interviewed over a hundred Finnish practitioners of spiritual music as accompanied call-and-response singing. Fifty of the interviews were given by individuals who practised plant medicine ceremonies and identified as spiritual but not religious; who perceived their spirituality as independent from institutionalized forms of religion; who had travelled extensively in search of plant ceremonies, and who could be classified as mystical tourists.*

Most of my interlocutors took part in a range of religious traditions’ devotional music. It soon became clear to me that many of my spiritual but not religious interlocutors had become acquainted with South American shamanism and ceremonial therapies associated with medicinal

* The interviews were conducted in 2020–1 by the author, who has also translated the citations presented in this article into English.

plants while travelling in search of meaningful spiritual experiences. In discussing two kinds of ceremonies, cacao and ayahuasca, I seek to find answers to the questions: What stages and elements do they consist of in Finnish spirituality? What kind of appropriation are they associated with? What is the role of processes of commercialization in their continued practice? What meanings or belief systems are central to their practitioners? Based on my findings, I argue that the forms of cultural appropriation in question align with the individualistic spiritual well-being needs of the Finnish participants. This is related to the theme of 'sacralization of the self' associated with a subjectified ethos in contemporary liberal Western societies and 'romantic liberal modernity'.

I approach appropriation from the theoretical perspective of mystical tourism as defined by Michael Hill (2008) as spiritual tourists who travelled to the Andes to consume the beliefs and practices of local indigenous communities. These pilgrims were met by a tourist industry preconfigured for white foreigners, actively marketing cultural elements, such as the indigenous shamans, healers and herbalists; and the mystical power of the local landscape and pre-Hispanic archaeological sites. The uses of mystical tourism are associated with the subaltern class identity of indigenous peoples, 'New Age cultural romanticism', marketing strategy, and state tourism development discourse (p. 252).

The interview questions were open-ended, semi-structured and descriptive, with interviews lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. The transcribed interview material was coded and analysed with the aid of computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis software, with an inductive and iterative approach to methodology. The interlocutors were committed to and often involved

in organizing plant medicine ceremonies. The participants were contacted and informed after random and chain-referral sampling, online and offline, with permissions obtained in face-to-face situations and via email. Most interviews were by necessity conducted online or as telephone interviews because of the strict limitations placed on fieldwork after the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Particular care was taken in observing research ethics at all times. One of my interlocutors criticized me for not having taken ayahuasca myself, as they felt that this caused my interview questions to sound 'novice' or 'naïve'. I was also reminded by others that ayahuasca shamanism and shamanic tourism should not be equated with 'drug tourism', because it is not about recreational use of drugs in exotic locations with the intention of smuggling dangerous drugs. Most begin with more complex personal motives, and the experience is often unpleasant (Fotiou 2014: 159).

Contemporary spirituality stresses the self, its expression and authenticity, as well as therapeutic techniques typically practised in small groups that emphasize individual empowerment (Sointu and Woodhead 2008: 265–7; Sutcliffe 2003). Despite claiming freedom of choice and independence from institutionalized religion, spirituality is based on institutional bases and reproductive conditions (Hero 2008: 219). It is associated with practices that borrow from a variety of cultural sources in producing new forms (Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Heelas 2008).

Liz Bucar (2022) defines religious appropriation as a form of harmful religious borrowing, which may 'depend on and contribute to the oppression and marginalization of religious communities and individuals'. It occurs 'when individuals adopt religious practices without

committing to religious doctrines, ethical values, systems of authority, or institutions, in ways that exacerbate existing systems of structural injustice' (pp. 2–3). Lack of context for belief and practical application may be among the reasons why contemporary spiritualism in the post-secular, fragmented society is unable to capture the holistic nature of indigenous shamanism (Fotiou 2016: 170).

Some cultural borrowings are not morally neutral because of existing systems of inequity (Bucar 2022: 7). Societal, ethnic, racial and economic position of the indigenous tribes are an example of such a systematic inequity that has continued for generations. Bucar points out that appropriation is often used to call out cases of commercialization that cause harm to marginalized communities, but most instances of religious appropriation are ignored or labelled as something else to hide their exploitative qualities (p. 203).

I employ the categorizations of appropriation given by Richard A. Rogers (2006) to identify types of religious appropriation involved in Finnish mystical tourism in Central and South America, and the use of the appropriated religious elements in the shamanistic ceremonies of contemporary Finnish practitioners. I also look at the ceremonies and the forms of asymmetrical power dynamics, which the appropriations of Finnish mystical tourists depend on or which reinforce cultural exploitation (*ibid.*).

In conceptualizing appropriation, Rogers defines four types of appropriation: exchange, dominance, exploitation and transculturation. These definitions are based on the premise that acts of appropriation and their implications are 'shaped by, and in turn shape, the social, economic, and political contexts in which they occur'. They 'reflect and constitute the identities

of the individuals and groups involved as well as their sociopolitical positions, who engage in appropriation with various intentions, motivations and interpretations (Rogers 2006: 476–7).

For Rogers (2006), cultural exchange is 'the reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres, and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal levels of power'. Cultural dominance refers to a unidirectional 'use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture'. This category implies a relative lack of choice about whether or not to appropriate, which applies here on the part of the indigenous culture in question as the 'receiving' culture, and on Western mystical travellers as the 'sending' culture. Rogers calls the creation of cultural elements 'from and/or by multiple cultures' transculturation, where it is difficult to identify a single originating culture from cultural appropriations that have been 'structured in the dynamics of globalization and transnational capitalism creating hybrid forms'. Cultural exploitation refers to 'the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation' (p. 477).

Appropriation, mystical tourism and spiritual commercialization

In terms of religious appropriation, by the beginning of the twentieth century theological movements had already drawn from Orientalist scholarship for personal spiritual cultivation. Galen Watts argues that expressive individualism was shaped by the 1960s romantic liberal social imagery that swept across liberal democracies in the West, reforming their institutional spheres into 'romantic liberal modernity' (Watts

2020: 216–17); ultimately reflecting the motivation of a new middle class to externalize subjective experiences (Dawson 2017: 32).

In Bucar's analysis, religious appropriation motivated by liberal motivations tends to make harmful forms of religious appropriation possible, because it emphasizes individual autonomy and freedom over the rights of social groups; it legitimizes appropriation by framing it as pursuit of universal goods, and disguises harmful appropriation with religious tolerance (Bucar 2020: 214).

Ritual activity practised by Westerners tends to be viewed through an instrumental lens, where the aim is either self-understanding or self-transformation. Rituals are performed by the self, on the self, and for the benefit of the self (Dawson 2017: 27). This 'subjectified ethos' is supported by ritual repertoire born of the appropriation of traditional South American paradigms and other themes to afford participants a variety of themes to articulate the 'sacralization of the self'. Because the self is understood to be 'connatural with transcendent reality', subjective states are seen as 'reflective of external realities', making 'what the self thinks and feels potentially of cosmic significance' (p. 31). 'Sacralization of the self' as a theme consistently emerges from the interviews.

The trend towards individualization of participation that is adapted to the needs of the self at a specific time and place is reflected in a shift from membership relationships to access relationships. Medicinal plant ceremonies in Western cities are among the spiritual therapies embedded in processes of commercialization. Because the best channels of distribution and marketing opportunities arise in urban environments, it is not in jungles that new alternative therapies have developed but in urban

environments, where the access relationships are also formed (Hero 2008: 218–19). In modernity, spiritual growth becomes a process by which the self also produces itself by applying the practical knowledge it has gained or appropriated from the spiritual repertoire. The self is a reflexive consumer of the spiritual: it becomes the product and the producer (Dawson 2013).

Social media has quickly become part of the infrastructure of new regimes of religious interaction, and counts among the many arrangements that allow providers and customers to learn about each other, get into contact, and build up mutual trust and reliable expectations between the provider and the person interested in the service (Hero 2008: 213–14). It is in this commercialized regime that appropriation, as an essential part of it, or the entrepreneurial processes of spiritual service production remove religious patterns of interpretation from their original contexts, and modify and recombine them into therapy or counselling (p. 220).

Discourses derived from South American history are characterized by a strong undertone of colonization and exploitation of indigenous people (Fotiou 2020: 378, 389; Poutanen 2017: 4). Associated with the mystical tourism of Finnish spiritual practitioners is ayahuasca. A Westernized, localized version and easily produced analogues have spread in and adapted to Finnish spirituality (Poutanen 2017: 67). Appropriation associated with Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism and culture localized to suit local needs play a part in the 'mystical tourism' of Finnish spiritual practitioners and can both become harmful appropriation.

Ayahuasca is a brew prepared for ritual use by Amazonian indigenous peoples from the stems of the South American giant vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, often combined with leaves of the shrub *Psychotria*

viridis. Shamanic tourism and ayahuasca tourism refer specifically to tourism that involves fasting, dieting and ingestion of the perception-altering plants utilized in religious rituals by Amazonian shamans and consumed in a structured ritual setting. Shamanic tourism emerged in Amazonia in the 1980s after the destructive rubber boom. After a surge in the early 2000s with the rapid global expansion of the ayahuasca ceremony, it has come to combine therapeutic and religious aspects in the West (Fotiou 2020: 374–6).

Michael Hill notes that ultimate authenticity as spiritual capital of the indigenous peoples he researched was converted in the mystical tourist industry into economic capital for white ‘New Age entrepreneurs’, but the indigenous communities themselves were often left out of these commercial exchanges (Hill 2008: 255–6). Although interactions are shaped by asymmetric relationships between privileged tourists and subaltern locals, ethnographic evidence has also revealed that the global circulation of meanings related to shamanism is what allows it to keep existing as a local category (Fotiou 2020: 391).

In Rogers’s categorization, members of the subordinated culture negotiate their position in a variety of ways. Based on my interviews, dominance is likely to be exercised on indigenous groups through appropriation of the ‘therapeutic’ themes of Western spirituality, as well as the narrative of ancient Mayan heritage or ancient shamanism as defined by Westerners. Evgenia Fotiou (2016) describes how dominance is exemplified by local shamanic revitalizations, which have changed with appropriation by indigenous practitioners from healing practices into ones restoring identity, finding value in indigenous traditions, and reinstating well-being (p. 166).

Finnish mystical tourists and ceremonial cacao in Finnish spirituality

Religious elements of the indigenous peoples of Central and South America have been appropriated and put to various uses by Finnish ceremonial facilitators and local entrepreneurs in Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru and Amazonia. One of these is cacao, which was culturally and historically important. Prayer and singing of religious songs to the spirit of cacao are devotional elements that were frequently brought up by my interlocutors, who, at the same time, insisted that cacao ceremony was not a religious practice. According to Liz Bucar, such behaviour is a tactic to ease the way for widespread adoption, despite the fact that this appropriation still includes devotional elements and descriptions such as connecting one to one’s ‘energetic source’ (Bucar 2022: 166). The prayers address everyday worries or spiritual development. Many of my interlocutors stressed the sustaining and rejuvenating effects of sound vibrations on the participants, as with those who practise the singing of Hindu mantras, or in the context of sound healing (Annunen 2022: 383).

My interviews indicate that many local vendors do not belong to indigenous Maya communities, and I was told by several of my interlocutors that the distributors of ceremonial cacao included American, British or Nordic individuals and families. Some merchants are associated with tour companies in Guatemala City and San Marcos, especially around Lake Atitlán, known as the site of plantations. According to some of my interlocutors, the plantations where the indigenous Maya earn their living in the production and sale of coffee and cacao are typically owned by Westerners. My interlocutors ordered large quantities of cacao from producers they knew personally in Guatemala, Ecuador

or Peru, selling them to ceremonial practitioners in Finland. One of my interlocutors knew a plantation owner who introduced her to ceremonial songs for the first time. Another participant speaks about how she travelled to Ecuador, to partake in courses organized by a Westerner, a plantation owner she personally knew, in order to gain insight into facilitating cacao ceremonies back in Finland. The spirit of cacao is believed to cause 'opening of the heart'; emotions of loving and of being loved; and to help one in dealing with one's own 'suppressed' and 'problematic' emotions. An organizer described his first experiences with the spirit of cacao in Guatemala:

The spirit of cacao gives you wisdom and opens the heart. It is like a friend beside you, offering its assistance should you need it. Cacao is the real facilitator, not you. When we started in Finland a decade ago, I had felt nothing like it. I cried and felt how toxic things left my body, emotions began to flow, private emotions I had kept inside about my parents and my sexuality. It works on so many levels. There is a spirit in cacao that supports its use as ancient medicine in alternative circles.

Cacao ceremonies were organized on a weekly basis in Finland in 2021, with prices up to hundreds of euros per individual for participation in one ceremony. Yet none of my interlocutors appeared, for instance, to be aware of the religious connection between cacao and maize. It was cacao that was labelled 'ceremonial grade' that was imported and sold to customers. The cacao mass was believed to have incorporated the divine or mystical properties, and to contain the spirit of cacao. Many ceremonies combined expressive techniques, such as dancing, movement, poetry reading,

drawing, writing or painting. Some emphasized dancing and movement over other forms of expression. Another organizer related the following about movement and the expression of inner emotions:

It is vitally important that we are being guided into our body, to feel and sense the body, for us to even notice the effects of cacao. In a way, our becoming aware of it always enhances its effects, like feeling how your chest warms up. Paying attention to the bodily effects grants us knowledge in the moment. In cacao ceremonies some difficult emotions may emerge. It can feel like there is some kind of lump in the area of the heart or the diaphragm, or one may get sad. Maybe some emotions emerge, sadness, rage or joy, which you haven't been able to express before in your life. Movement is really important in cacao ceremonies. It allows you to share with others from a more complete part of yourself. It is the way cacao is able to move around in the body along with the sound and singing that can activate through that movement the effects of cacao and wisdom in us, which can emerge.

This example of forming counter-intuitive representations illustrates how my interlocutors achieved the sacralization of the self through expression of inner subjective states: cacao as a spirit has become ingested in the body and 'moves around' in the body because of the effect of sound and singing. By moving around in the body, cacao was believed to bring out wisdom thought to pre-exist within oneself.

The songs in cacao ceremonies were typically not borrowed from Central or South American indigenous peoples. Often, they were written by Finnish practitioners.

As an example of resignification, where contemporary spiritual meanings and communal musical expression are retained but elements are mixed and combined, most of my spiritual but non-religious interlocutors borrowed songs for their plant ceremonies from various traditions. Subjective feelings were also described as more important than what was being sung. In addition to the role of emotions in 'restoring sacredness and devotion,' resignification also connotes new meanings with the discovery of the therapeutic experience of expressing oneself through singing or crying together in a safe space, and could empower participants to become ceremonial facilitators themselves.

I took part in my first plant medicine ceremonies five years ago. They gave us lyrics on paper for mantras in Sanskrit, but also in Spanish, Portuguese and Finnish. It was a pivotal experience for me, even though shamanistic and alternative views on life had been close to my heart since childhood. For me, the ceremony opened up the healing powers of singing together for the first time. I found I could express emotions, strength and solace; to cry and concentrate on the energy of singing together in a non-judgemental space. Soon I began organizing cacao ceremonies for women myself.

Cacao ceremonies usually took from two to six hours to complete. My interviews indicate that the structure of a cacao ceremony consists of five stages, which I have named preparation, tuning-in, prayer, music and closing.

Preparation. The order of stages and songs is pre-configured by the organizers. The starting point of a cacao ceremony is the preparation of the cacao over fire. My interlocutors believed that when warmed,

cacao 'received impressions' from the 'intentions' of the people who were taking part in the ceremony. In the beginning, everyone may briefly introduce themselves and say something about their feelings. Cacao was being sung to and blessed. The spirit of cacao, a feminine entity, a 'mother' or a 'grandmother', was prayed to. These prayers may take the form of songs, thoughts, wishes and requests regarding individual needs or societal problems one feels acutely. An altar is installed; people are welcomed; song lyrics are handed out; a safe space is defined. There is talk about cacao, its history and preparation, rituals associated with it, and its expected effects.

Tuning-in. The shared space is usually 'tuned in' with music or song. Some ceremonies have physical movements in various directions, the raising of the cacao cup to one's head or heart, or lowering it to the ground. This is related to the idea of affecting and being affected by cacao's 'energy'. Sharing cacao is about individual connection to everybody present. The spirit of the cacao is welcomed. Another frequent element is so-called 'energetic purification' that is achieved by smudging, for example, with the pitch derived from juniper or Palo Santo (*Bursera graveolens*), while singing to cacao and other plants. The cup is circulated and, before drinking, participants are often encouraged to 'place their intention' on cacao. An organizer explains:

You may know how to stay in your heart centre, how to boost the cacao, or how to create deep metaphysical structures within it – it is not 'just' cacao! It is something else when it comes into your hands. You share it so that each person gives it to another, and while holding the cup one takes and gives energy, so that when circulating around the circle everyone loads

the cup with good energy and looks in the eyes of the other. When you get the cup, you're like 'wow!' Then we load it with an intention – what is it that you want more or want less in your life; what is the change you need; or do you need help with something? Then you drink it. It is an experience that opens your heart.

Prayer. This phase signifies the individual experience of the relationship with the cup and the content, the individual space, and individual internal processes. Silence is usually required; there may be meditative journeys, sound healing, or the solo singing by the organizer. Participants are encouraged to communicate to cacao their inner 'intention,' a particularly important or central private question or endeavour in one's life.

Music. In the musical section there is singing and music-making, dancing, often poetry, sometimes painting and other expressive techniques such as somatic movement or Tantric practices. Singing in cacao ceremonies was experienced as easier in terms of the language used than in indigenous plant medicine ceremonies. The music forms a powerfully felt connection between the ritual elements in the ceremony valued by the organizers and the participants:

These experiences with song and cacao are the most beautiful there can be. I have assisted in and organized cacao ceremonies. We've had people visiting to lead music. The cacao ceremony is ultimately about the skill of creating sacred spaces. Other elements include the beauty of symbols, power objects, flowers, fire and understanding. It is also about preparation, how it is being prayed to by singing songs. We sing to cacao 'Cacaocita, la medicina, cacao-

cita, la di di di / Cura, cura cuerpecito, cura, cura, la di di di / Limpia, limpia, espiratito, cura cerpecita / limpa limpa e spiritu.' Or, you can also sing mantras for Shiva.

Closing of the ceremony. The last phase of the ceremony usually consists of talking, asking questions and sharing one's inner experience. There is often a sharing circle at the end of the ceremony. People may share their experiences with cacao and its spirit, their emotions and thoughts, feelings and things important to them. The safe space that was opened at the start is closed at the end of the ceremony. Sharing was felt as especially meaningful by my interlocutors:

One of the biggest things for me in the cacao ceremony is the closing at the end, when I can hear in the sharing circle what everyone has experienced. Those things are so wonderful and touching, and often quite powerful things, that people have experienced. At that stage one's own experience and ceremony expand, so that it is no longer just about what I experienced about a theme, but this is complemented by those fifteen other experiences. Sharing in the end is also very meaningful. When we put our experiences into words, we also become more aware of them.

As part of what was conceived as Maya culture as a construction produced in Central and South America and the West, contemporary Finnish mystical tourists appear to imagine the Maya indigenous people as essentially spiritual, despite paradoxically de-ethnicizing, de-territorializing and disembodying the local Maya cultural heritage for their own, often commercial, use (Hill 2008).

The ayahuasca ceremony and the asymmetrical relationships of appropriation

Another significant consequence of appropriation through mystical tourism in the Finnish spiritual milieu are ayahuasca ceremonies. It is through ayahuasca shamanism that animal, plant, nature and ancestor spirits could be experienced in controlled contexts (Virtanen 2014: 59). The role of ayahuasca in music-making in Finland's holistic spirituality came as a surprise to me, especially as most of my interlocutors had reported a negative disposition towards intoxicants. Because of criminalization in Finland, some of my interlocutors were not willing to talk about their ritual experiences with ayahuasca. Even so, one in six interlocutors brought up their experiences with ayahuasca ceremonies. Many had travelled to South America to acquire first-hand experience.

It is difficult to get information about the stories and tales of the native *curanderos* without going to the Amazon. It is to some degree possible to learn rituals and songs from the visiting shamans, of course. I have noticed that when I sing the songs by myself, I find a connection to the spirituality I experience in the song circle. There is a religion behind it in calling various spirits, and it helps people to connect to other people and creates a sense of community.

My interlocutors gave estimates ranging from two to eight monthly ayahuasca ceremonies in Finland, but the more routine estimate was two or three ceremonies monthly, or thirty annually. Often, if not always, the ayahuasca ceremony is preceded by the nasal snuffing of a powdered psychoactive tobacco, the base of which

is *Nicotiana rustica* mixed with the ashes of the leaves of other tobacco plants. I was invariably told that this is a tradition of the Amazon indigenous tribes, such as the Huni Kuin (or Kaxinawa; see Virtanen 2013:202) and the Yawanawa, which has been adopted for use in Finland.

Rapé, which is pronounced *ha-pay*, is the shamanic tobacco that is blown into one's nose. The pipe *tepi* is used with another person who is facing you, and another pipe, *kuripe*, can be used when you are applying it alone. When I'm the facilitator and a person comes in front of me, I connect with them energetically and intuitively select the right type of tobacco for them. They can tell me what they need help with. I load the *hapay* with energy, bless it and place an emotion into the blowing of the *hapay*. I ask God to grant the person whatever is best for them.

With two people facing each other the tobacco was blown into the nose of another practitioner using a pipe made from animal bone, often ornamented. The v-shaped *kuripe* was intended for self-application. The pipes were widely available online. I was also told that there were ceremonies where only *rapé* was taken. Usually, the use of *rapé* came up in the context of ayahuasca ceremonies as taught by indigenous shamans, who sometimes visited Finland, and under whose tutelage the Finnish interlocutors had studied in the Amazon. In my interview material, the use of tobacco appears to be almost a universal practice, but its naming and use depends on the culture acting as the source of appropriation:

Sometimes there is *rapé* tobacco, depending on the culture involved. The Shipibo tribe of Peru do not use

rapé, they use *mapacho*, while the Huni Kuin and the Yawanawa use *rapé*. Some take it by themselves. The Huni Kuin do not take the tobacco until the ceremony has been opened by the masters. So, there are cultural nuances.

Mapacho is another mixture with *Nicotiana rustica* as the base. My results show that *Nicotiana rustica* is perceived as an agent for purification and healing. This is one of its purposes among the Yawanawa (Virtanen 2014: 65). Its ceremonial use in the data supports my argument that the forms of cultural appropriation in question align with the individualistic spiritual well-being needs of the Finnish participants.

Ayahuasca ceremonies begin with people sitting in the circle together and the shamans opening the ceremony with specific ritual words to invoke particular plant spirits. The shamans of different tribes of the Amazon use different ritual words. There is a typically a fire-altar in the centre of the circle. The shamans bless the ayahuasca and begin serving it to all the participants. After everyone has taken the 'plant medicine', the singing of sacred chants follows. Ceremonies run for hours and often take place on consecutive days during weekends, with time to rest after each nightly ceremony. At the end, in order to integrate their experiences, people are usually allowed to share their feelings and how they experienced the ceremony. The repertoire of songs is not only taken from an indigenous culture, but also from other spiritual cultures, for instance songs from the Rainbow movement and Hindu-inspired *mantras* are included. Many of my interlocutors had strong emotions and explained them afterwards in the context of their spiritual beliefs, for instance beliefs in reincarnation. They felt a sense of familiarity and of being welcomed back.

According to my interlocutors, music and singing had a central place in their ayahuasca ceremonies, especially the singing of traditional native songs called *icaros*, which were described to me as calling forth the spirit of ayahuasca. The songs introduced by Westerners often included Sanskrit mantras, Christian hymns and Rainbow songs, a feature that has come up in other Finnish studies (e.g. Poutanen 2017: 30). Most of my interlocutors had also practised *kirtan*, a form of accompanied Hindu devotional music that has been adapted from India through new religious movements into contemporary spirituality. Like *kirtan* leaders, the people who lead the ceremonies can be understood as 'social instruments' of contemporary spirituality, who help others to align with the divine in a safe space (Honko 1981: 178–81). A leader of the ayahuasca ceremony described this in terms of healing:

I feel really empowered. With medicine songs the healing process is not always pleasant, sometimes you will have to face problematic emotions and processes, to abandon your old narratives or beliefs. Everyone who comes to the circle has emotional processes going on. When I get to play and sing, the spirits will come through the song, the music. So, I try and step out of the way and allow the music to help sustain the safe space.

Pirjo K. Virtanen (2014) argues that music is an important way of materializing knowledge in ayahuasca shamanism as 'an intersubjective field' in which things of the non-human world that are normally invisible become visible and materialized, and as an important bridge-builder with non-Indians (Virtanen 2014: 67, 71). The *icaros* are power and healing songs that

the Amazonian shamans are said to have learned from the plant spirits and that are sung throughout the ceremony in order to infuse the ayahuasca brew with healing or cleansing power, and transmit it to the recipients.

In ayahuasca shamanism, chanting offers a central means for communication and a vehicle for sharing knowledge and experiences (Virtanen 2014: 60). *Icaros* are chanted to invoke and communicate with the spirits of the plants, so that the *icaros* will subsume their healing powers (Fotiou 2012: 17). Some of my interlocutors who had spent years in the Amazon learned *icaros* from the local indigenous shamans. One Finnish shaman tried to describe the experience that comes with the *icaros*:

The *icaros* are astonishing. When you are in a dark room, they are the most beautiful thing in the world. You will see hummingbirds. Then when it ends and it all becomes silent, everyone vomits at the same time. *Icaros* are really strong, they guide the spirit of ayahuasca, so you could say we converse with its spirit. Oh, you dear, thank you for asking but I cannot describe this with words to you. When the vision channel opens, the sacred knowledge flows in beyond your understanding. Maybe you can imagine someone cutting your head open and just pouring in sacred wisdom and knowledge into your brain.

I associate my interlocutors' belief that plants and other non-human natural life-forms and processes have a spirit and an intelligence with animism, the idea that spiritual intelligences or life-forces animate natural objects or living things. Associated are shared ethical *mores* specifying the relationships with spirits, and communication

with and veneration of them, and a promotion of experienced kinship with them and with other practitioners (Taylor 2010: 15).

It is through contemporary ritual practices such as addressing the plant spirit in the contemporary ceremonies that animism becomes a private experience of contact with 'spiritual intelligences' in nature, and the development of respectful and beneficial relationships with them, centred around the goal of healing as a form of 'spiritual animism' (Taylor 2010: 15). As demonstrated by Virtanen (2013), the agency of the Amazonian indigenous peoples is rooted not only in their relationships with the majority population but also with non-human actors, which are 'spiritualized' and regarded as cultural actors; there is no separate 'nature', in the Western sense, but it is part of humanity, and its actors are to be lived with in the same way as others are (Virtanen 2013: 193, 195, 202).

Discussion

My data indicate that indigenous religious elements are in Finnish ceremonial contexts resignified as new therapeutic functions in collectively created musical and ritual spaces. They are utilized as tools for individual subjective well-being. Resembling Andrew Dawson's descriptions of indigenous ritual acts in contemporary spirituality, the Finnish plant medicine ceremonies have an 'aestheticized' character, where familiar and new emotional states are stimulated and nurtured through rituals designed to elicit and strengthen emotions and their embodied expression. This arose as a significant theme in the interviews. The generation and sustaining of emotions and their embodied expression was understood as being important for the therapeutic effects on the individual to emerge. There is a resemblance to sound therapies, where recent research has shown somatic asso-

ciations and sensory experiences to play an important role in the way relationships with material objects are understood, interpreted and constructed in an 'enchanted' manner (Annunen 2022: 387).

Many of the practices are built on the foundation of appropriation of religious elements, often from cultures geographically and temporally far away from each other. The chanting of songs as prayers to the spirit of the cacao plant is an example of this. Many of the interlocutors were spiritual entrepreneurs, who instrumentalized the practices for private entrepreneurship and had in the process partaken in the commodification of cultural elements they have appropriated from Central and South America. Dawson points out how the ongoing detraditionalization in the global ayahuasca ceremonial culture is shaped by a new middle class demographic and unfolds through the contemporary reconfiguration of traditional beliefs and practices 'in recalibration of the balance between the individual and the collective contexts of ritual', which has led to 'the relativization of traditional communal obligations because of ongoing subordination to the preoccupations of modern, self-oriented individuals' (Dawson 2017: 33).

A consequence of the 'sacralization of the self' for spiritual entrepreneurship is the shifting of the balance of power from the service provider towards customers, who are in a position to demand that services are geared to their personal needs, and who expect spiritual services, such as plant medicine ceremonies, to directly affect their personal well-being (Hero 2008: 220). Shaman-led ayahuasca ceremonies in the West and in retreats and tourist lodges in the Amazon are said to increasingly diverge from traditional native ceremonies, because they try to meet Westerners' needs and demands, in the process eliminating

ritual elements that don't speak directly to the quest for subjective transformation (Hay 2020; Rogers 2006: 487). It is appropriation in which the central contradiction of racialization is manifested within the mystical tourist industry: the idea that religious culture can be essentially embodied, but that it can be appropriated at will by Western tourists (Hill 2008: 252).

Fotiou (2016) contends that one of the problems with mystical tourism is the romantic misconception that indigenous peoples live in some kind of harmonious state with nature, when in reality they are people embedded in larger struggles, who face significant challenges. One of these is having to endanger their lives in defending their territories and ways of life, for example against destruction by deforestation (Fotiou 2016: 165). As Fotiou notes, this happens with Westerners flocking to Western-owned ayahuasca retreat centres with substantial amenities, where they are charged thousands of dollars to have 'authentic shamanic experiences and to connect to ancient spiritual traditions while healing themselves' (p. 166). As several of my interlocutors told me, 'there is a lot of money moving around this practice.'

Mystical tourism as appropriation and commercialization of indigenous religious knowledge fits Rogers's (2006) definition of cultural exploitation, 'the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation' (pp. 477-8). Fotiou (2016) points out that ayahuasca shamanism in the Amazon was born as a response to external forces, to racial inequality, to subaltern class identity, and to oppression and exploitation of the indigenous peoples. She raises the concern that there is in its appropriation a real danger of the erasure of the plight of indigenous peoples and of the injustices

committed against them (Fotiou 2016: 170).

Only two of my interlocutors mentioned the continuing injustices against the indigenous peoples. This does not, of course, indicate disrespect towards them. A few of my interlocutors brought up the argument that mystical tourism ‘probably benefits’ Amazonian communities, which have ‘guarded these secrets’ for Westerners. Pre-tourism ayahuasca ceremonies in the Amazon cost around ten euros for a person; today, with the lodge and healer services the prices go up to thousands. But those lodges are owned by non-Indians, and the cost of ayahuasca, which is consumed in great quantities, has risen so steeply for locals in the past decade that their access to their traditional cultural heritage has become limited (Hay 2020). Many of the local retreats compete fiercely for tourists and actively scout out tourists to bring to their retreats (Fotiou 2014: 165). Helle Kaasik (2022) calls ayahuasca ceremonies of Western spirituality a ‘cargo cult in reverse’, providing its contemporary practitioners with strong experiences but which may already have destroyed ‘their functional core that existed in traditional use’ (Kaasik 2022: 51).

On the other hand, as Virtanen has shown, ayahuasca enables a dominant position to be adopted by indigenous peoples and allows them to demonstrate their knowledge (Virtanen 2014: 69). They can also garner economic value from ayahuasca rituals, as well as from lessons in textiles, ceramics and body painting. Outside the Amazon, the Indians who lead ayahuasca ceremonies are rarely considered ‘shamans’ in their own communities. Their shamans usually deal with illnesses, sorcery and the health of the community. However, fame brings acknowledgement and economic opportunities (p. 74).

In global spiritual ceremonial culture Dawson distinguishes the concern to ensure what he calls ‘meritocratic efficacy’, the need to obtain sought-after results through executing appropriate prescriptions. The hegemonic narrative of what he calls ‘relativizing holism’ lends itself to the ‘relativization of all forms of practical knowledge as expressions of one and the same all-encompassing, universal reality’, calling for the appropriation and revision of beliefs and practices from a wide variety of sources, cultural traditions and contexts into a ‘hybrid and rapidly evolving’ worldview that is both practical and symbolic (Dawson 2017: 30).

Such narratives of relativizing holism can be found in my interview material. According to some of the interlocutors who were involved in bringing cacao ceremonies to Finland, these ceremonies underwent a different but rapid route of evolution in Finland compared to the ceremonies elsewhere in Europe and in Central America. Differences lie in the pronounced musicality in comparison with cacao ceremonies elsewhere, and in the influence and infusion of Hindu *kirtan* music into ceremonies.

Holistic preoccupations are not compatible with the gendered distinctions, dietary restrictions, ritual disciplines and hierarchized authority structures of the traditions from which its appropriations have been accomplished (Dawson 2017: 32). These hybrid spiritual worldviews lose their connection with indigenous traditions in the mind of the practitioner. The face-paint that is applied by indigenous practitioners in ayahuasca rituals is an example of appropriation where the religious meanings behind the tradition have become lost to the mystical tourists. Several persons who organized and took part in ayahuasca ceremonies described how it aids them in moving into a spiritual phase or readiness:

The idea of the face-painting is that during the ceremony it protects the participants from unwelcome spirits. It is some kind of protection against malevolent spirits. I myself have felt that when I put on that face-paint, my everyday self is transformed into a spiritual self.

There are local reasons for the face-paint that have little to do with Finnish holistic spirituality. The same patterns also appear on ceramics and textiles, and are based on the designs associated with particular spirits that appear in visions (Virtanen 2014: 62). A possible source of the Finnish belief may reside in Amazonian concepts of sorcery. In the Amazonian worldview energy is conceived as residing in the body and is influenced by substance ingestion or expulsion. Fotiou notes how in indigenous worldviews, good and evil are always relational and contextual, and that Westerners fail to see how they are contextualized in local conflicts and Amazonian cosmology (Fotiou 2016: 163; 2014: 167).

The use of *Nicotiana rustica* is another example. Some of my interlocutors stated that they did not wish to take *rapé*, but did so because it is given by the shamans as part of ayahuasca ceremonies. The meanings of *icaros* were difficult to grasp from an emic perspective, to the point of being alien to Westerners in every way imaginable, impossible to follow, closely entwined with indigenous practices, tribal history, environment, creation myths, structure of language, and life in the jungle. These elements were connected with each other: the face-paint recalls visions, vines, myths and animals, and the geometric shapes of the spoken language and the structure of the indigenous songs recall tribal histories, ancestors and spirits.

Yet another example of mystical tourists appropriating shamanism, also present in my interviews, is what Fotiou calls ‘feminization of ayahuasca shamanism’. Ayahuasca may be associated by some with the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Fotiou notes that Western gendered perceptions of the plant spirit are complicated by the heavy domination by men and of shamanism having been traditionally a ‘male domain’ in the Amazon (Fotiou 2014: 171–3).

Developments in the ‘facilitation’ of various spiritual plant medicine ceremonies in Finland are based on the appropriation of religious elements from South and Central America. The appropriation of plant medicine ceremonies can be understood as giving mystical tourists, as central actors in this appropriation, a role as the privileged group, which, despite the incentive to locals for financial gain, excludes the possibility of cultural exchange. Asymmetrical relations appear as inequality of commodification, where the reimagined religious elements become spiritual commodities to be bought and sold outside their local contexts. On the other hand, ayahuasca ceremonies as local culture retain their features, and it does not appear that the dominant culture has been unidirectionally impressed on them.

While contemporary spirituality in Finland may bear marks of trans-culturation, where cultural elements are created in hybrid forms from multiple cultures in the dynamics of globalization and capitalism, the cultural elements appropriated from, for instance, Yawanawa ceremonies and associated ritual elements cannot be conceived of as ‘cultural hybrids’. The only category in Rogers’s typology that seems to fit is cultural exploitation (Rogers 2006: 486).

Rogers defined cultural exploitation as ‘the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture that is treated as a resource

to be “mined” and “shipped home” for consumption. It appears to include a positive evaluation of a colonized culture by a colonizing culture, but reinforces the dominance of the colonizing culture. When appropriation has degrading effects on the integrity of the exploited culture, for instance when non-natives claim authority to define the appropriated culture, the understandings of both cultures are distorted (Rogers 2006: 486–7). Rogers links commodification with cultural exploitation as ‘abstracting the value of a cultural element’ and removing it from its native context, changing its meaning and function. It is, he writes, ‘a key element in the hegemonic strategy of incorporation’, where an alternative practice is redefined by the dominant culture (pp. 487–8).

The case of plant medicine ceremonies illustrates how Finnish spiritual practitioners have appropriated an indigenous cultural tradition as a method to achieve contemporary individual ends associated with the theme of sacralization of the self and processes of commercialization. In providing individual tools for psychological well-being, they appear among other cultural elements appropriated and combined in Finland’s spirituality as part of seeking and discovering deeper spiritual meaning. This becomes a strong impetus in defining the lives of Finnish ceremonial participants who travel as mystical tourists, seeking the wisdom of indigenous peoples. In the analysis they also appear asymmetrical and a form of potentially harmful appropriation made possible by Western currents of romantic liberalism that emphasize expressive individualism (Bucar 2022; Dawson 2017; Fotiou 2012, 2014, 2016, 2020; Hill 2008; Rogers 2006; Watts 2020). ■

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