



The AYAHUASCA VISIONS of PABLO AMARINGO

Howard G. Charing and Peter Cloudsley



The outside world was first introduced to the work of the Peruvian artist Pablo Amaringo with the 1991 publication of the book; 'Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman,' and since then he has been recognised as one of the world's great visionary artists.

Pablo Amaringo was renowned for his intricate, colourful paintings inspired by his shamanic visions. He was a master communicator of the ayahuasca experience. He was entirely self-taught, and able to paint with meticulous botanical precision the Amazonian landscapes and the essential mythic content of his visions. His paintings depict the visions that he received during his years of

practice as an *ayahuasquero*¹, they capture the spirits, sub-aquatic cities, celestial realms, extra-terrestrial beings of great wisdom, sorcerers in battle with shamans, all revealed to him by ayahuasca.

Pablo's paintings are imbued with a supernatural quality, as he regarded them as physically manifested *ícaros*². Pablo chanted *ícaros* whilst he painted into them as though they were medicine.

He explained: "I chant *ícaros* when I paint, so if ever a person wishes to receive teaching or healing, they should cover the painting with a cloth for two or three months. On the day they remove the cover, they should prepare themselves by bathing and

meditating. When it is uncovered they will receive the power and knowledge of the ícaros that were sung into it."

In 1988 Pablo founded the Usko Ayar Amazonian School of Art in Pucallpa, dedicated to depicting and preserving the ways of life and indigenous knowledge of the Amazon. The work of the school has been tremendously influential and created what we now call 'New Amazonian Art'. The author and plant spirit shamanic practitioner Steve Beyer wrote of Pablo's work, 'I think it is fair to say that the surge of foreigners seeking out ayahuasqueros in the Amazon, beginning in the mid-1990s, was driven in large part by Pablo's extraordinary paintings. Indeed, as depictions of ayahuasca experiences have grown normative, it may be that in addition to the experience prescribing the art, the art is prescribing the experience.'

The well-known visionary artist Robert Venosa says of Pablo's work, 'The high mission of art, through its illusions, is to foreshadow higher states of reality, and no one did this better in the depiction of the ayahuasca worlds than Pablo.'

CREATING THE NEW BOOK

The inspiration for creating a new

book about the artist's work began in a moment of serendipity during an ayahuasca ceremony in January 2007 in the Peruvian Amazon.

Howard G Charing remembered the experience: "My visions that night were filled with the vivid colours and motifs of Pablo's work, and then in what I can only describe as a neon-coloured flash of electricity, the message appeared to do a book on Pablo's work."

"The following day I was still filled with this 'electricity' from the ayahuasca session, and then I knew with certainty that this book would happen. I discussed the idea with Peter [Cloudsley], as he and I had been working since the 1990's organising ayahuasca and plant medicine retreats in the Amazon. We decided to visit Pablo in Pucallpa - as we had known Pablo and collected his work for many years - and discuss this with him. When we spoke of it, Pablo's face immediately lit up, and then with great enthusiasm we embarked on the book."

The book was a complex project, which required cataloguing and having the paintings professionally photographed. At a later stage we migrated to using digital scanning technology.

Pablo provided us with hundreds of pages of his personal

notes and journals, and we held many meetings with Pablo in Pucallpa to explore the multi faceted, allegorical, and mythic qualities of the paintings.

In these meetings with Pablo we were amazed at his vast eclectic knowledge and we also enjoyed his personal anecdotes, his spiritual wisdom and gentle humility.

This was also a joyful experience for Pablo, as he notes in his own introduction to the new book: 'This book is very different from my first book, because I have felt much freer to express myself in it. For the former book everything was written down from the beginning and we gave it an academic appearance so that it would be taken more seriously, or at least recognized as a piece of anthropology.'

'Eighteen years ago, one did not expect to get much credence for subjective experiences, and my fears of being misinterpreted or criticised for not being Catholic



Above: Pablo, Peter and Howard discuss a painting

ONDAS DE LA AYAHUASCA

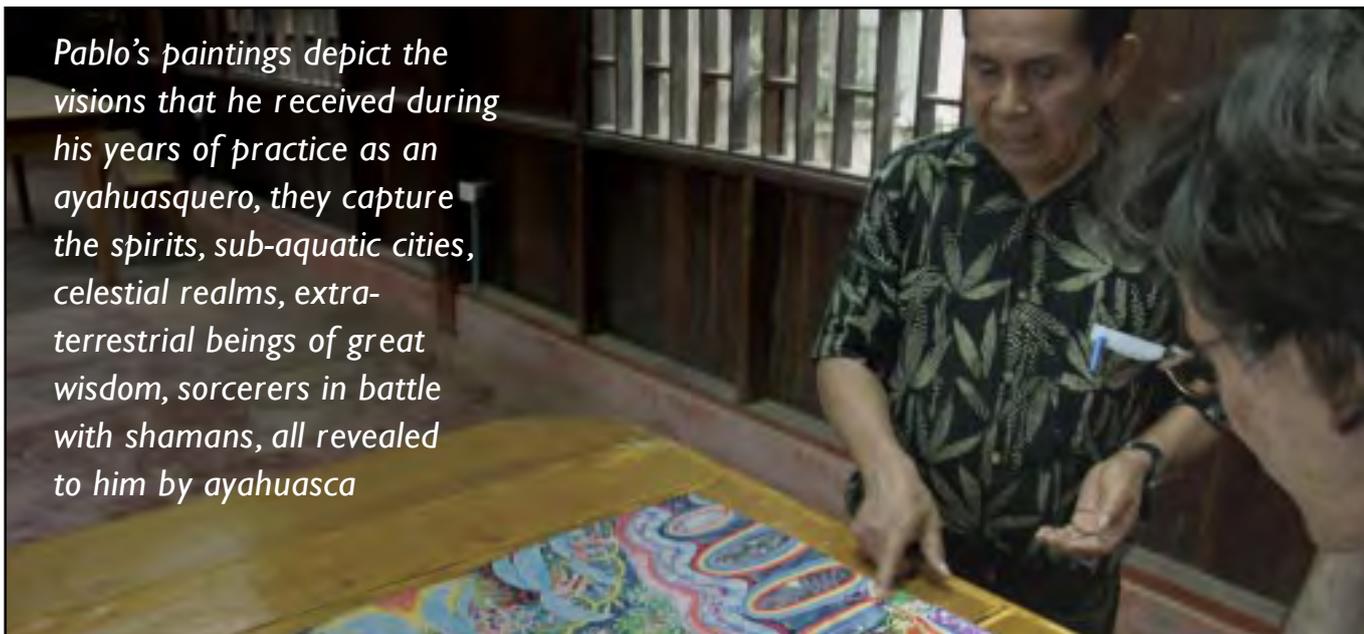
At the top of the picture the sun radiates brilliant waves. As the source of all life on earth, the sun represents the blessings of the divine celestial pattern, the ultimate source of all life in the



universe which we call God. We see that everything is energy and all matter is formed of pulsating waves and vibrating particles of electromagnetic energy. For us on earth the sun is the source of this energy and we perceive it as light. Our eyes can only see a limited spectrum of chromatic light as in the rainbow. Other frequencies are invisible such as infrared and ultraviolet. The ayahuasquero and his assistants in the ayahuasca ceremony here can perceive the iridescent rainbows emanating from the alternate dimension normally invisible to the eye.

Ayahuasca is one of the most remarkable gifts from the plant realm, as it contains chemicals identical to the neurotransmitters found in the human brain. When you drink ayahuasca the sensory neurons that transmit messages inside the brain are enhanced so that a person can discover extrasensory perception and receive wisdom and knowledge.

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Above: Pablo and Peter look at a painting together

were greater.' 'I have told my personal stories behind the visions and my experiences with Amazonian people and folklore. All of this should provide guidance to people following the way of plant knowledge and ayahuasca - to live life more creatively and take more care of the earth.'

WORKING WITH PABLO

Sometimes Pablo's explanations of the meanings behind his paintings played intriguingly with ambiguities, and hinted at the ineffable. At times we struggled with our interviews with him, and they challenged us not to arbitrate too

much on what might be meaningful or otherwise.

In his painting 'Unicornio Dorado,' for example, he contrasts the Western rational path to the wisdom of the indigenous way, which, he said, is faster. He had tried both routes and believed that ultimately both were needed if our spirituality was to evolve sufficiently to lift humanity out of the crisis in which we find ourselves.

One of the most gratifying and important aspects of working with Pablo on the book project was that we were documenting oral knowledge that otherwise would have been lost.

In the book there is much material about plants; their medicinal and shamanic properties, and the traditional ways of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon.

Some of the stories that Pablo told about his grandfather and great uncle, who were both formidable *paleros*², were fascinating. These stories challenge our notion of reality as they traverse the boundary of the everyday and the supernatural worlds.

For example in the painting 'Yacuruna Huasi' Pablo related a personal experience, 'When I was a boy I saw my grandfather, Ambrosio Amaringo Vazquez, rescue a person who had been missing for months.

UNAI SHIPASH

The muses of time can be seen in the upper sphere and the accompanying muses of space in the lower sphere. The two divinities in yellow are *virtudes*



(virtues); they represent elevated qualities of love, compassion and kindness.

The muses in the lower sphere watch over the entire biosphere from the ozone layer down to the depths of the ocean. Time and space appears united to us, and we are a part of them, but an alternate time and space also exists beyond our everyday experience which we can perceive through the eye of ayahuasca.

The eyes are the windows through which the world attracts us, through which we choose colours, shapes, and sizes. It is possible for us to lose all this at any moment; if we go blind, there will be no use for our eyes. Space will continue to exist in our hearts and minds but no longer in our vision. They say time is worth silver or gold but in fact it has no material equivalent. In spiritual terms, time is life and not to be wasted, so we should take what is offered and learn what we can. Everything has a purpose.

He was brought into the house looking half dead followed by several *yacuruna*.'

'I was not allowed to look, but I was curious, so I climbed up to the roof of the house and lifted the palm leaves to look into the room. There I saw the *yacurunas* with their faces hidden under their sunhats surrounding the rescued man.'

'The padre on the veranda afterwards said it was too late; the man was already transformed into a different shape. He said nothing could be done, the man would have to go back to live with the *yacuruna*.'

On two occasions in 2008 Pablo suffered acute dengue fever, which severely debilitated him. After this, he never fully regained his strength and vigour. In 2009 he became visibly frail and we knew deep down that he might not make it through to the book's publication.

We felt that he knew this too, because in March of that year he said, "I fear that I will go before I paint all that I have seen. But this is no problem... I will finish painting them the next time when I come back."

On November 16, 2009, after a brief illness, Pablo César Amaringo died at his home in Peru, surrounded by his friends and family.

Pablo said of his work that it requires the viewer to be curious, because its meaning will not be understood from a superficial looking. Of the book we produced together he told us; "It requires readers to ask why and what the book is trying to teach them, and it is my hope that this book will be published in order that people might benefit from what I have learned, and I have faith in its success."

For more information about the book, photo galleries, and opportunities to purchase fine art reproductions of the paintings featured therein, visit www.ayahuascavisions.com

Howard G Charing has organised specialist retreats since the 1990s to the Amazon rain forest. He co-authored *Plant Spirit Shamanism: Traditional Techniques for Healing the Soul*, published by Destiny Books (2006).

Peter Cloudsley is a musicologist and writer who, since 1980, has created an archive of traditional music and interviews in Peru and collected for the British Museum. He published *A Survey of Music in Peru* in 1993, and two CDs: *Fiesta Music from Peru* (2000) and *Shamans of Peru* (2002). He established the Amazon Retreat Centre in Mishana in 2004.



AYARI HUARMI

The picture reveals the eternal mystery of the feminine. When a woman works with the spirit of ayahuasca and other plants, her radiant spiritual purity appears in the vision embellished and garlanded with beautiful flowers. Just as lakes and rivers have luxuriant foliage and blossom adorning their banks, so a woman expresses the splendour of the entire natural world.

Women embody heavenly beauty, tenderness and grace, while men

should develop wisdom to be of service to beauty in their lives. When a woman learns to sing *icaros*, they resemble tuneful bird song, flowing water or the sound of wind blowing through the trees.

Her *icaros* evoke the joy you feel when you visit a park brimming with brilliant flowers and majestic trees. Therefore, when a woman develops her innate esoteric knowledge she is much wiser and more capable than a man is.



BARCO FANTASMA

Manuel Huaya was a great ayahuasquero who travelled about in his boat healing people everywhere using ayahuasca and medicinal plants. He inhabited a world of great masters from Atlantis and China, and lived with the fairies, sylphs and muses who guarded the forests, rivers and plants.

Manuel Huaya transformed a huge anaconda into the phantom boat you see here with two huge eyes and a steel horn on its forehead - like a rhino - for defending itself from danger. It has several floors, each representing a level of life's evolution, at the same time a level of social hierarchy.

Peter Cloudsley remarked about this painting; "Here we can imagine

the indigenous peoples' first sighting of the rubber barons in the nineteenth century. Peering through the undergrowth at the edge of a river they see a huge steamer hissing at them and seemingly returning the incredulous looks of the Indians through the eyes on its prow. The clattering engines shatter the primordial tranquillity of the river at night, and the steamer's electric lights cause the natives to perceive the steamer as an Amazonian spirit accompanied by welcoming mermaids and sylphs."



TERMS USED IN THE TEXT

1: Ayahuasquero is a specialist in ayahuasca. The term 'shaman' is a recent Western import into the Amazon in the past thirty years. In the Amazonian tradition there are many specializations and categories. The traditional generic term would be Vegetalista, which denotes they have received their power from the plant kingdom.

2: Palero is a specialist in the bark, roots, and resins of trees.

3: Ícaros are magical chants that are sung or whistled by shamans during Ayahuasca ceremonies. There are several kinds of ícaros. At the beginning of a ceremony their purpose is to provoke the mareación or visionary trance state, and to render the mind more susceptible for visions to penetrate. The shaman on his plant diet learns the ícaros directly from the plant spirits. Ícaros have great power and influence on the visionary experience of people drinking ayahuasca in a ceremony. Pablo also regarded the ícaro as the sound of the universe - the planets, stars, comets, and supernovas. Everything is created by music, by vibration, by sound. Ícaros are the music of creation.

4: Yacuruna: in the mythological world of the Amazon, the yacuruna (literally 'water people') are the primordial hairy ancestors of humans. They inhabit the subaquatic realm of rivers and lakes. They kidnap people to be their consorts.