



Invisible Seeds



Chonon Bensho, *Samatai Jonin Nama (The Dream Of The Man)*, oil on canvas, 2021

Invisible Seeds

Created by Shipibo artist **Metsa Rama** and Argentinian-Peruvian artist **Gala Berger** with the support of agricultural science researcher **Irene Guerrero Fernandez** (JRC).

1) Project

The project *Invisible Seeds* investigates the cultural creations of Shipibo-Konibo artists in the Peruvian Amazon, concerning their ancestral methods of agriculture, sustainability of food systems, and protection of the environment.

Invisible Seeds will seek to commission a new series of embroidered and painted textiles by the Shipibo-Konibo community of artists. The images depicted on these textiles will focus on the complex systems of planting, harvesting, and treating agricultural products that sustain life in the Amazon. With the pieces obtained by this commission, a unique spatial installation will be created.

In that sense, the commissioned pieces will address the relationships between the territory, human beings, non-human forms, and the spiritual worlds. Produced mostly by women, Shipibo art represents an entire system of communication with plants and plant life. The Shipibo word that designates these visual productions is Kené, which means design. The Kené is in itself a wide visual repertoire of geometric patterns on objects, ceramics, textiles, etc. But also the Kené is a method of image construction that presents a cyclical understanding of time and space where the human body and nature exist in a reciprocal dimension, in a physical and spiritual continuation. This is because there is ritual knowledge associated with these geometric designs, and because they have an aesthetic, scientific, linguistic, and therapeutic dimension that expresses the Shipibo vision of the world.

Through this project, we will develop a model of dialogue and co-responsibility in the decision-making processes between the artists involved (Metsa Rama and Gala Berger) with the Shipibo-Konibo artists in the Amazon and the specialized advice on biodiversity of Irene Guerrero Fernandez (JRC).

The pieces produced will propose the recognition of indigenous contributions to the sustainability of food systems, but will also accompany the struggles of the Shipibo people who claim the preservation and respect of their ancestral knowledge, for urgent actions to prevent the destruction of the Amazon and for better living conditions for indigenous peoples in Peru and everywhere.

2) NaturArchy

In recent decades, various artists and activists have developed a series of works and research projects that underline the social, climatic, and environmental catastrophe as something not anchored in the present but as a process that has been going on for several centuries as an effect of extraction, the accumulation and dispossession first experienced – and still faced today – by indigenous peoples.

What this project will attempt is to situate this conversation within the ways of knowing of the Shipibo-Konibo communities, where the agency of the natural world is interrelated with social identities, and nature is a being. The rivers, the trees, the anacondas, the fish, and the fruits are not passive entities to be dominated, but organisms full of vitality. For example, within the Shipibo worldview, it is not simply that plants “have healing properties”. It is about something else: plants, or more precisely, their spirits, have thought and it is this thought that is communicated to the blood of humans, plants are a subject that is supposed to know. Hence, its healing power.

This is not a natural contract established as a posteriori but a system of equality between different forms of life, human and non-human. Which is intrinsically related to what the Guatemalan thinker María Jacinta Xón Riquiac has pointed out as the vitality of vernacular and indigenous knowledge that is not sustained in the verification of the so-called ‘true sciences’ and their scientific method but rather in what she calls an “endogenous epistemology”, that is, “the validity of knowledge of and for communities and future generations, emphasizing its ontological character in which there is no separation between the material-natural, the social and the spiritual”.

The installation of these pieces in the space will try to open an intermediate space where speculation and the recognition of community knowledge. We want to raise the questions about how the contributions of Shipibo-Konibo science and knowledge can contribute to generating different points of view, either from the angle of visual arts or food production methods, storytelling, or intersection between different epistemologies.



Natural dyes on canvas with Kené drawing. Photo: Xapiri ground

3) Brief introduction to Shipibo-Konibo Art

I) Shipibo-Konibo Women Artists



Artist Lucy Silvano at her studio in Pucallpa, Peruvian Amazon, 2021

As we mentioned before, one of the main characteristics of the Shipibo-Konibo communities is their artistic production, particularly embroidery and paintings on cloth, wood, fabrics, and ceramics, in which geometric patterns known as Kené are used. Making Kené, that is, painting, embroidering, or weaving designs, is a typically female art, taught from mother to daughter, which uses a variety of materials, some derived from the forest and the farms, such as natural dyes, seeds, and cotton, and others industrial, such as fabrics, colored wool threads, and glass beads.

II) The Kené, the network that unites all the sensible worlds



Artists Silvia Ricopa and Betty Reategui with their works on cloth, 2021

The Kené is the design -based on the drawings of the skin of the anaconda- that has a deep symbolic meaning since it represents the geography of the forest, wildlife, and other living organisms. The elaboration of the Kené is intrinsically related to the knowledge about plants, and it is accessed through the visions produced by introspection induced by plants such as ayahuasca and chakruna.

III) Cosmology



Artist Mechita Sampayo with her works in natural dyes on tocuayo

According to Shipibo-Konibo epistemologies, the world (nete) is made up of four large spaces: water (jene), earth (mai), air (niwe), and sky (nai). In these four spaces or worlds live different beings in interrelation: humans, animals, plants, stars, and spirits. In the world of water (jene nete) live fish and other beings are capable of transforming into humans. Among them, Ronin -the anaconda- mother of the water who takes care of the water and the fish. Being communities that live on the banks of the Ucayali River and its tributaries, the world of water is fundamental, since the fish are the basis of their diet and the rivers are also the main means of transport. On the land (mai), live the Shipibos, the animals, and various beings such as the mothers of the plants. The air (niwe) is the space where beings live that punish or harm and that regulate the behavior of the Shipibos. For its part, the sky (nai) is the space where the souls of the dead are found.

Recently, the Ministry of Culture of Peru, through Vice-ministerial Resolution No. 068-2016-VMP-CIC-MC, has recognized the Shipibo customs of dividing the world as a Cultural Heritage of the Nation. The explanatory statement of the regulations recognizes the role of these practices as “an energetic and sound link between the spirits of nature and the human spirit”.



Artist weaver spinning. Photo: Xapiri ground

4) Scientific Framework

Climate change and environmental degradation are existential threats facing Europe and the rest of the world. To overcome these challenges, the European Union (EU) has launched the so-called European Green Deal (EVP). This is a series of comprehensive measures to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy by ensuring: that there are no net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, that economic growth is decoupled from the use of resources, and that there are no people or places left behind. Although the PVE is mainly a domestic strategy, it also has a dimension beyond Europe. The idea of ensuring that “no people or places are left behind” is infused with the EU’s aspiration to become the global leader in sustainability. For this reason, promoting sustainable forms of exploitation of resources beyond the borders of the Union is part of this global strategy to accompany societies in their transition towards sustainability.

About agriculture in the Amazon

The conservation and use of soils and biodiversity in areas of the Peruvian Amazon inhabited by native populations are sustained by the cultural relations of coexistence between them and their three life spaces: the forest, the water, and the farm. In these living spaces, there is a relationship of interdependence between human communities, cultivated plants, animal husbandry, and wild flora and fauna –including birds and fish–. This interdependence is expressed in the ways of life and activities of the communities that are part of the Amazonian cultural baggage. The interdependence between the communities and their environment is associated with the times of the year in which these three living spaces offer food and other products. When the rivers do not provide sufficient amounts of food (fish), the farm does so with the crops and, in the months when the farms do not produce enough food, the forest provides fruits and meat from hunting. Correspondingly, the native Amazonian community does not exert unnecessary pressure on these spaces when there are no conditions or sufficient supply of products in them. This temporality allows traditional agricultural practices to be carried out that take advantage of the fertile soils on the banks of rivers and oxbow lakes. In the dry season (April-October) when the rains decrease in the Andes and the highlands of the Amazon, the rivers of the “low jungle” leave extensive cultivable areas on their banks. These are the low floodable terraces with soils of recent alluvial origin. The high fertility is due to the dragging of abundant organic matter consisting mainly of leaves, branches, stems, roots, and fruits that come from the eastern flank of the Andes and the “high jungle”. This organic matter is deposited in the shallows during the months (November-March) that the rainy season lasts. The high temperatures of the Amazon facilitate their decomposition and endow them with the appropriate fertility for a diversity of tropical crops and wild species. After the last harvests, in mid-October and early November, the lowlands are flooded again and the following year they form again in the same or other places along the marginal strips of the rivers.



Mud from the Ucayali River. Photo: Xapiri ground

5) Technical Framework

The work process is divided between a) the previous research, b) the conversations to create the textile commissions and c) the resulting pieces.

a) The research aims to define the main contributions of agriculture and planting in the Shipibo-Konibo communities. Likewise, a field visit to the Amazon will allow us to contact artists and other cultural agents.

b) Once the artists who are going to be commissioned for the creation of the pieces have been determined, the themes to be represented will be defined together. Shipibo-Konibo artists have been using plant materials for generations to produce natural pigments that they later use in their textiles. However, although the use of black and brown pigments is still relatively common, other pigments are used less frequently and in many cases have been replaced by acrylic paints. Our project will try to support the maintenance and use of these ancestral practices of using plant pigments, which will also provide a continuous connection with traditional plant knowledge.

c) The textile pieces (around fourteen) will be transported from the Amazon to Lima, for later photographic registration and production of written texts. Then they will be shipped to Italy for the exhibition at Ispra, and for the other venues where the exhibition travels.



Artist Chonon Bensho, *Mechi Joni*, embroidery (colored threads on black cloth), 2021

6) Installation Details



Reference for installation of *Invisible Seeds*, 2023



The assembly will be based on the spinning method of Metsa Rama's grandmother.

7) Reference images



Map of Peru, with the geographical reference of where the artists are located in the Amazon.



Detail of the tracing on fabric. Photo: Xapiri ground.



Dyed with natural tree bark dyes.



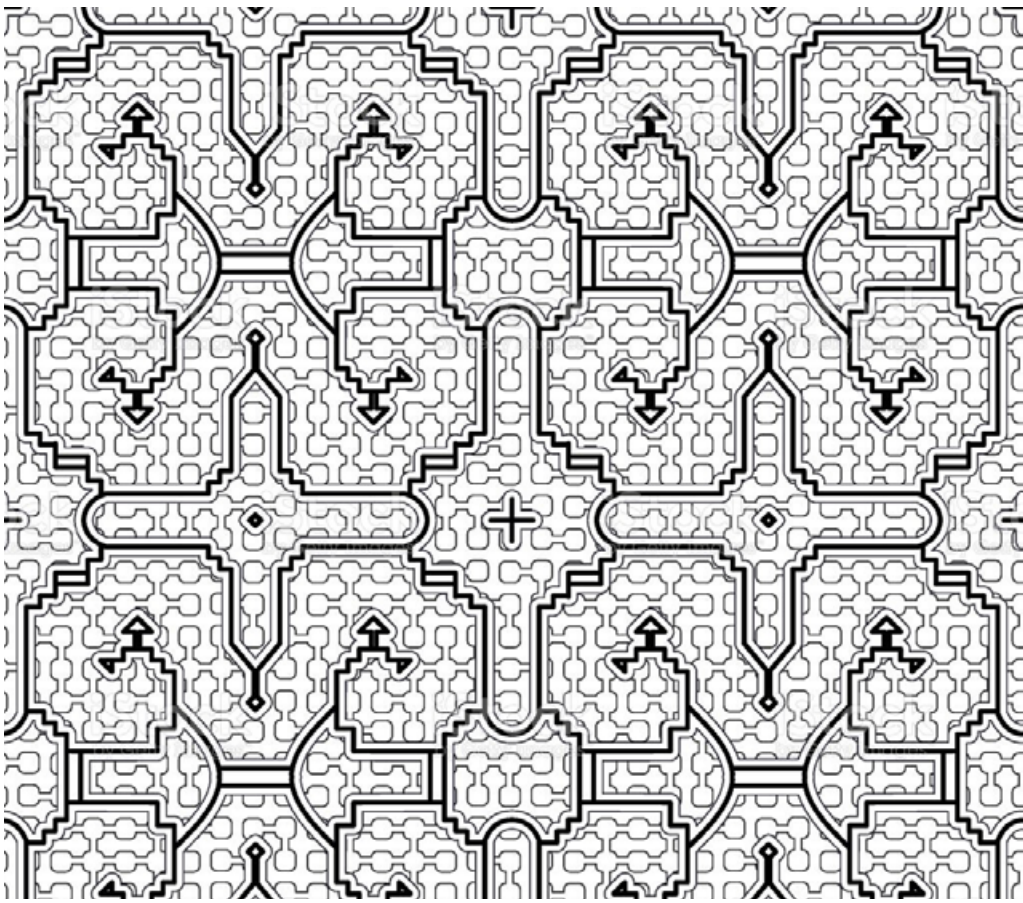
Olinda Silvano, artist and leader of the community of artists in Lima from the Amazon.



Artist Juana Reategui with her piece, natural dyes and acrylic paint on tocuayo, 2021



Artist Sadith Silvano, showing the work of her sister Lucy Silvano, 2022



Kené geometric pattern.



The ceramist Leidy martinez Panduro and her family.

8) Budget

Item	Quantity	Timeline	Description	Cost
Research trip	1	February / March 2023	Travel from Lima to Pucallpa. Metsa Rama	800 €
Research trip	1	February / March 2023	Travel from Lima to Pucallpa. Gala Berger	800 €
Research trip	1	February / March 2023	Travel from Ispra to Pucallpa. Irene Guerrero- Fernandez	2.500 €
Textile Art Commission	14	March / July 2023	Shipibo-Konibo artists in the amazon	5.000 €
Texts. Translation expenses	3	June / August 2023	From Shipibo-Konibo and Spanish to English	1.000 €
Catalog printing	300	Agosto 2023	printer to be defined	5.000 €
International shipping of textiles	14	Agosto 2023	company and insurance to be defined	2.000 €
Coordination expenses	1	Diciembre 2022 Septiembre 2023	travel and materials	1.200 €
Mounting system	1	Septiembre 2023	materials for the construction of installation devices	1.000 €
Lightning	1	Septiembre 2023	lighting for pieces	600 €
				Total 19.900 €

9) Team

Metsa Rama

Pilar Rossany Arce Mahua (Metsa Rama) was born in the Paoyhan community, Loreto department, Ucayali province, Padre Márquez district. She currently lives in the Shipibo-Konibo Community of Cantagallo in Lima. She has studies in international relations at the Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola-USIL. In 2019, she entered the National Intercultural University of the Amazon (UNIA) to study Bilingual Intercultural Education; In addition, she is an Amazonian artist who loves her culture and her language. Currently, she is a member of the project: Offices of Indigenous Languages and Cultures (OLCI Peru), promoted by the Embassy of Brazil in Lima and the Brazil-Peru Cultural Center.



Gala Berger

(Villa Gesell, Argentina, 1983) is a visual artist and independent curator, currently living in Lima, Perú. Berger's work is rooted in Latin America, and for the development of her projects she builds independent spaces.

Berger has also worked extensively in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she is co-founder of La Ene (New Energy Museum of Contemporary Art 2010 - 2020) experimental museum, and co-founder of the Paraguay Printed Art Fair. Also between 2012 and 2014, she directed two exhibition spaces: Inmigrante [Immigrant] and Urgente [Urgent]. She has held individual and collective exhibitions in Santo Domingo, São Paulo, Lima, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Seoul, Querétaro, Sorocaba, Medellín, Montreal, Tampere, Río de Janeiro, San Juan, among others.



Irene Guerrero Fernandez

I am a Spanish PhD Ecologist with focus on Farmland Biodiversity. My research career has developed on the interaction of human activity and biodiversity in agricultural landscapes. This relation is central, as the functioning of agroecosystems, their capacity to provide, depends very much on their ecological integrity. As crucial to communities, this interaction between food production and nature is very much shaped by policy. Thus, inevitably I have become increasingly involved in supporting policymaking. Yet, my path towards agricultural policy has led me to my current position as a project officer in the D5 unit of the JRC here in Ispra.

