

Urban entrepreneurs, rural conservationists: Shipibo-Konibo artisan livelihoods across the changing landscape in Ucayali River basin, Peruvian Amazon

This research explores livelihood dynamics of female Shipibo-Konibo artisans in the Peruvian Amazon, based on the field-based data collected between June and August 2022 in Peru's department of Ucayali, with the support of CLAG Student Field Study Grant. Despite centuries-long exposure to European colonizers and religious missions, the Shipibo-Konibo, the Indigenous group of the Ucayali River basin, have preserved their language, traditions and a vibrant material culture. Material culture in particular has in recent decades evolved into an important livelihood activity for many Shipibo-Konibo women. Indigenous artisans and their families harvest an array non-timber forest products (NTFPs) that serve as raw materials for textiles, souvenirs and accessories. As old growth forest gets cleared away or degraded, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find around rural Shipibo-Konibo communities. With more young people seeking opportunities in the city, and with ongoing deforestation and biodiversity loss in Ucayali, there are concerns around the future of Indigenous cultural continuity and ethnobotanical knowledge. My MA thesis research seeks to provide a better understanding of how indigenous women artisans are adapting to the changes around them.

Key words: female livelihoods, ethnobotanical knowledge, multi-sited households, livelihood resilience



Shipibo-Konibo artisan in Yarinacocha at work, painting kené designs on a cotton cloth dip-dyed with mahogany

I arrived in Pucallpa, the Department's and largest city of the Ucayali region in June 2022. While my original plan was to split my time between one rural community and the city, talking with some Shipibo-Konibo artisans in Pucallpa made me realize how diverse rural communities of Ucayali are, and how important the connections between the countryside and the city are for women's livelihoods. After making some local connections, I decided to adjust my plans and focus on four sites that offered different perspectives on how multi-sited household arrangements work in artisan families, and how Shipibo-Konibo crafts and forest materials are transported, sold and shared between rural and urban areas, animating this livelihood. The CLAG Student Field Study Grant allowed me to hire an experienced field assistant, a Shipibo woman trained as a bilingual teacher, whose family members are also artisans. Together we interviewed 30 artisans in three rural communities and around Pucallpa.

The first community I visited was Limongema, located about an hour upstream along the Ucayali River from Pucallpa. Most women in Limongema, assisted by their partners and children, are involved in craftwork. An ayahuasca lodge was opened in that community a few years ago by local resident. As a result, a continuous flow of international tourists created an opportunity to sell traditional textiles and souvenirs to the visitors. Through a government-led reforestation initiative, some Limongema residents have planted native hardwood species for their home gardens, including *huistinini/pokoti* — mahogany (likely *Swietenia macrophylla*, although a few other species are also referred to by the same Shipibo names). Mahogany bark is one of the key ingredients of Shipibo material culture. A little goes a long way with mahogany dyes: when the exterior cortex is harvested carefully, the tree continues to grow, and the cortex can be subsequently re-harvested. Neighbours in Limongema often share cortices and ornamental seeds,; others exchange seeds with friends and relatives from other communities.

Vista Alegre de Pachitea was the second rural community I visited. The village is located at the confluence of Pachitea and Ucayali rivers. During the dry season, the community is accessible from Pucallpa via dirt road - a journey that takes about 3 hours. The village still has some old growth forest nearby, although it is being rapidly fragmented by roads, pastures and agricultural fields. Being somewhat removed from the city, artisans in Vista Alegre have access to more artisanal materials in their home gardens, *chacras*, and the forest. On the other hand, the lack of tourist traffic makes it more difficult to sell their products. Some older women, like Marina, whom I first met in Pucallpa, split their lives between Vista Alegre, where her daughters and granddaughters produce textiles and handicrafts, and the city, where she sells their products on the street. When I asked Marina's family about the availability of mahogany and other plants used for textile dyes or seed handicrafts, they said that these materials are still present around the community, and that being able to make a living from their craft also motivated them to plant more of these species in their home gardens (such as huayruro - *Ormosia coccinea*), and to experiment with other plants, such as plantain leaves, in order to develop new techniques and reduce dependence on the tree cortices that cannot be harvested often.



Artisan showing a young huayruro tree in her home garden in Vista Alegre de Pachitea



*Huayruro seeds (*Ormosia coccinea*), a popular handicraft material, are brought to Pucallpa by rural folk and are sold by kilogram*

I made a couple of trips to San Francisco de Yarínacochoa, a community well-known for *artesanía*, which has become a tourist destination in itself. With urban growth around Pucallpa, San Francisco has become a *de facto* peri-urban community. On a 90-minute journey from the city, one mostly sees villages which are separated by fields and camu-camu plantations. Some elderly artisans in San Francisco have memories from the times when the village was much smaller, and old growth forest was still present within a short walk from the community. Manuela, one of the oldest residents of San Francisco, told us that where her house now stands, old cedar and mahogany trees used to grow. She grew up watching her mother make ceramics using locally available tree cortexes and resins, which are mixed with clay to make pottery more resistant. When Manuela was still a child, around 80 years ago, she remembers centennial trees being cut down and sold to outsiders in exchange for cloth and iron pots, an unfair exchange that took advantage of Shipibo-Konibo's precarious socio-economic situation. While San Francisco today has a reputation of a vibrant, touristy village, and features an artisan fair and ceramic workshop, natural resources traditionally used for Shipibo-Konibo handicrafts have been largely depleted: artisans mentioned that they purchase most of the pigment-bearing cortexes and seeds from vendors who bring these materials from different corners of Ucayali.

In Pucallpa, I spent some time with artisans at *Maroti Shobo*, a cooperative and an artisan fair in the district of Yarínacochoa, which is frequented by Peruvian and foreign tourists. What made *Maroti Shobo* a particularly interesting study site was the fact that many of its members, who are all Shipibo-Konibo women, come from different regions of the Ucayali basin, and maintain a strong connection with their communities of origin, where their family members often harvest artisanal materials and produce handicrafts which are then transported to Pucallpa to be either transformed or sold at the cooperative marketplace. Moreover, women working at the cooperative are in a significantly less precarious socioeconomic situation compared to the many street handicraft vendors, who lack economic stability and safety. Artisans at *Maroti Shobo*, recognizing these inequalities, offer support to fellow artisans who may be going through a difficult time by buying their products to then resell them at the marketplace.

The handicraft economy in Ucayali is a predominantly female activity that is often not taken seriously because of its seemingly marginal economic output. However, this livelihood reveals the entanglements of rich economic support and material networks that span the entire Ucayali River basin, and the broader understanding of how the Shipibo-Konibo are adapting to the changing economic and ecological landscape in the region.

Resting under a shiringa (Hevea brasiliensis) tree near lake Yarinacocha. Shiringa



Chatting with one of the oldest artisans of San Francisco de

