

THE MOST POWERFUL SHAMAN: About creation and transformation of mythology in native societies on the Ucayali river (Peruvian amazon)

Introduction

The title mentions a “shaman”, although in south america there do not exist any shamans, despite many ethnologists who still use this term and introduced it in the region, derived from Mircea ELIADE’s (1951) well-meant intention to find global congruencies of “shamanism”. Here it is but a pointer towards an early reinterpretation of western items in Indian society: some local healer-witches¹ now regard themselves as “shamans”, though literally they aren’t.

The Native Indians of the Peruvian Amazon region, in their total count of probably more than 250.000 (MINSA 2002:8f), live nowadays in different degrees of non-contact, contact, interrelation or assimilation with the Peruvian interpretation of western global society. There are probably 72 different ethnic groups still being self-conscious in the region (ORTIZ RESCANIERE 2001:48). The present paper will concentrate on the Shipibo-Konibo, a big group living on the main Amazon tributary Ucayali.

The terms referred to in this paper result mainly from experiences of the author, living highly integrated with Shipibo people for four years². The informal interview, the memories of what the Indians *asked* the author and what they *told* him, sometimes helped by cautious questioning, build the database. The interviewed people are mainly bilingual teachers, traditional healer-witches and casual visitors coming from different regions and ethnic groups.

Life in the villages

The Shipibo are famous throughout tourists and ethnologists because of the unique geometric designs in their art and their great skill in traditional healing, phytomedicine and magical activities. They retain their art and ethnic identity, living mainly in native communities in voluntary separation from Peruvian mestizos. In the villages many women (but usually never men) can be seen wearing traditional clothing and the Shipibo-Konibo tongue is used in all everyday-conversations, even in school, because bilingual teaching is common.

There are about 120 Shipibo-Konibo native communities. In its centre most villages contain a communal assembly house, a radio communications service, a primary school and an evangelic church. In bigger villages there also are secondary school, medical post, shops and bars, mostly with television and video, a satellite telephone and communal storehouses. In the biggest downriver community, Pahoyan, these days a computer centre with public internet cabins is being installed.

Shipibo daily life nowadays mainly hangs in the vacuum space between traditions and western post modernity. While a main part of the now over 40-year old men carry on fishing, hunting and cultivating land, and the elder women work in the fields, do housework and produce handicraft, in the younger population segment a significant shift to mestizo-like

lifestyle can be observed and a new orientation to go on studying, journeying and joining political forces arises.

Usually young Shipibo know what is the internet and they try to get access to it (what can be very difficult because of the medieval, river-based infrastructure of the region). Most of them affirmed that they consider it as a useful educational source and want to find new, international friends accessing the internet³. They also told me they liked the games and enjoyed porno graphical contents.

Most elder people, on the contrary, find the IT very suspicious and consider them somehow dangerous, mainly in naive Christian semantics: for example, the introduction of the computerized national identification document, which has to be carried by every Peruvian, already produced fear when in the many numbers printed on it the sequence “666” appeared⁴. Many elders think that the internet is diabolic, sealed with the number of the beast, and will subdue “original” Indian intentions.

Constipation theories can be heard from both older and younger people. They mainly refer to the white people (especially US-Americans) as evil and engaged in a fight against the Indian people, trying to convert them into working slaves, and – worst of all – intent to steal the Shipibo culture⁵. Global political events like 9/11 or the US and Britain bombarding Afghanistan or Iraq are included there as confirming examples. The Natives identify themselves solidarily with other victims.

Shipibo-Konibo myths

Analysing Shipibo history (TOURNON 2001:21ff), we suppose that there was pre-colombian contact with the andean Kechua peoples, commonly called the Incas, but there is little evidence. Anyway, the Shipibo consider *the* Inca as their culture-bringer and there are many relates about him and his deeds in mythical past. Most Shipibo myths and stories include contact in any form, be it with the positive Inca, any other ethnic group, or even demons⁶.

Let us pick out two special aspects: first, in most relates the Inca is drawn in the shape of a half-god, equipped with superior material culture and marvellous magical powers. Many Shipibo believe until now, even teachers and educated people, that the Incas flew before the Spanish invaders up some Ucayali tributaries, and established in those most remote places big hidden cities with major (modern!) military defences and magic camouflage, waiting for the right moment to beat back the invaders of old together with their Shipibo allies.

There are also some genesis related stories about the Inca shaping today's life into its current form: sometimes we can hear about the white man, the Shipibo, other Indians and Peruvian mestizos (in descending order of respect!), as a whole created or transformed to by the Inca. Usually the white man appears smartest or quickest and so gets away with the best attributes. Other Indians and mestizos, however, represent the hierarchical basement, so the Shipibo still have enough neighbours to look down on⁷.

Sometimes the white man is called *wirákocha*⁸, derived from the Kechua deity *Huiracocha*, which underlines the hypothesis, that the white man is the Inca's successor as superior human being (in Shipibo point of view, of course).

Second, the other side is described in the many stories about the *Pishtako*⁹. Nowadays it is being told that the *Pishtako* of old killed people who went alone into the woods by crushing the victim's head with a wooden mace, then sucked out all of his body's fat, as a kind of vampirism. The next stage of the *Pishtako*'s obvious technological progress was the use of a mechanism that looks like a photographic camera and also produces a flash but instead of capturing a picture it decapitates its victim. After killing, the face was cut off, also the genital apparatus. Nowadays the *Pishtako* seduces his victim by promising him employment, but by any means, once alone with him converts into killer, to drain out the fat *and* to cut off face, genitals *and* any important organs.

It is surprising, how many first-hand eyewitnesses I know personally who insist having seen human corpses hanging like slain pigs in the cellars of Christian missions, tourist establishments or factories, fat running down on them to be collected in containers. Most Shipibo know some *Pishtako* by their names, mainly referring to US-American residents in Pucallpa who work for missions or the drug eradication agency (DEA).

By the way, the Kechua word *Huira-cocha* means literally "fat-lagoon".

***Ayawaska* and the new myths**

In Native Indian life nearly all over the Amazon basin the drinking of the hallucinogenic plant brew *ayawaska*¹⁰ has great influence on cosmology; most obvious in Shipibo culture, where the main ethnic significant, the elaborate geometric designs called *kené*, has a close relation to optical perception under the hallucinogen's influence (GEBHART-SAYER 1985:12, ILLIUS 1987:54ff).

During history the visions of the *ayawaska* drinking healer-witches, a very privileged group within the Indian social sphere, had a high acceptance as statements of real truth, coming from the world of spirits that was considered as superior than our world in everyday perception. So the healer-witches' orders, relates and suggestions formed the common worldview in many ways¹¹.

Nowadays the drastic effects of *ayawaska* on human psyche attract many tourists from western countries in search for new experiences – and the Peruvians answer with broad offers of "ayawaska tours", "mystic tourism" or "shamanism workshops".

Many Indians (and mestizos) work in touristic *ayawaska* sessions. Thus, foreign cultural items are being introduced. Usually when Shipibo singers (healer-witches, applying their special medical songs, equally as simple villagers) get recorded, they include in their songs remarkable metaphors about the tape recorder, the fact that their voice will be carried away to distant countries, or about the journey of the visitor, mentioning airplanes or big ships¹². These metaphors are frequently used, because they implicit a "powerful precedence". Why?

The scientist

In their songs under *ayawaska* influence they mention words and symbols of (magical) power, as to impress the audience or the 'enemies' they are fighting in their visions. Traditional symbols for power are the anaconda (Shipibo: *ronin*), the black panther (*wiso ino*), the huge

lupuna tree (*shono*) or spiritual entities like the heavenly spirits (*nai yoshinbo*) or the wind master-healer (*nive meraya*), and many more.

In my recordings of Shipibo healer-witches I found many new words of power, mostly loan words from Spanish, like *gasolina*, *avión*, *soldados* or even *diós* and *Jesucristo*¹³. Metaphoric neologisms as mentioned above are applied regularly, also the remarkable *nokon bewá mákina* (“my singing machine”), which symbolizes the animating force for their long, improvised songs, replacing more traditional terms like *yoshinbo imašbon* (“imitating singing spirits”).

The spiritual entities also have got new loan-word names, like *rios rokotorobo* (“divine doctors”), *shitanabo jonibo* (“gipsy men” – witches!), or the mighty *sintijiko* (“scientist”). Especially the latest caught my interest and I have asked many healer-witches, who could be a *sintijiko*. Although it seems to simply substitute the legendary master-healer *meraya*, it carries a quality of “knowing how to manage the foreign/global world”. Unlike the *meraya* who knew how to contact the animals, plants and neighbouring peoples, often singing in many different indigenous languages, the *sintijiko* is specialized in contact with westerners and their technologies.

Feedback

One healer-witch told me about his (spiritual!) venture to New York, where he met mighty doctors who had studied the *sínsiya* (“science”) and who cured with the help of huge and complicated machines. He also told me, that the *sínsiya* can be learned by the means of long “diets”, the traditional way the healer-witches apply to master their arts. He said he “dieted” himself for three month together with a master *sintijiko* before he came back to Yarinacocha.

Now the healer-witch’s patients who still mainly live within their ‘doctor’s’ social sphere and understand the words of the songs, are left after a treatment with impressions that they had been operated by “scientists” from New York or divine surgeons with huge x-ray-machines, and that the singing healer was animated by some kind of song-producing engine, while he washed the patient’s body (spiritually!) with chlorhydrate (*rijiya*) and airplane fuel.

These are extreme examples, but all of them I have heard from my native informants. The mythology of the native people is still alive, although highly transformed, and we can point the way and means of a new mythology.

Conclusion

We quickly have gone through an introduction to the Shipibo people, then to reflect their current struggle between the worlds of traditional rainforest life and globalisation. After revising two of their most common myths, especially regarding contact with white men, we concentrated on transformed terminologies applied by the healer-witches, who still are the most powerful promoters of ‘traditional’ cosmology.

Remembering the two examples for Shipibo myths, the Inca’s and the *Písbtakeo*’s, we shall quickly recognize that even in past times the myth was never a permanent relate – on the contrary: the semantic message about how to recognise and treat the others, be it white people, Incas, other Indian tribes or mestizos, even demons, which is the main issue in most Shipibo-

Konibo myths, can be carried on orally in many a form. As long as a special myth-telling syntax is maintained¹⁴, nearly any story can be recognized by an experienced Shipibo as a myth.

Shipibo-Konibo mythology in particular and mythology as a human social phenomenon in general is to be interpreted as a guide-line for young participants in a society how to respond to the unknown, the strange and the incomprehensible.

As the instruments of globalisation are introduced very sporadically in Native Indian societies on the Ucayali river, mainly their effects are known – by television and relates of travellers from the main regional cities. The Native Indians are therefore confronted with stories that lie outside their comprehension and they have to include the rumours into a conformist style, into traditional clothes that ban the danger and the incomprehensibility.

While the *Pishtako* of old, who killed with his mace, was finally outdone by a young Shipibo hunter who was simply wittier, the modern demon with his economic seduction strategy also finally gets trapped by the same smart Indian. What this means for the Indian's daily life? – Well, we can not know, it still is a myth.

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¹ The term "healer-witch" I have introduced here as a reflection of the spanish terms *curandero* and *brujo* or the quite similarly applied shipibo words *benshoamis joni* and *yobé* which denominate the generally serving healer and the antisocial witch respectively. In most cases, any 'professional' ayawaska drinker incorporates both personalities, thus called here healer-witch.

² I first elaborated my master's thesis (BRABEC 2002), after about one year of fieldwork, then married my Shipibo wife and kept my young family alive working as language teacher in Pucallpa for two more years, before entering my current extensive fieldwork about the musical practises of Native Indians on the River Ucayali, which was started in february 2004. All time long I was in direct contact with my wife's big family, and beside my many questions to everyone, my brothers-in-law, uncles and so on often opened their hearts to me, especially after the collective ingestion of a few bottles of beer or large amounts of the traditional manioc-brew *masato*.

³ The finding of "gringo"-friends is a very important topic in Peruvian life in general, because marriage with a westerner usually provides the easiest and often the only possible way of exiting the country and getting access to higher education and better social standards respectively.

⁴ ... even if it was "66" or only some "6" in different numbers. Broad information about those fears was provided by bilingual teacher Medardo Mori Silvano, personal communication.

⁵ Memories about mostly mestizo and white lumber traders who still exploit the Indian workforce as a very cheap way to earn a lot of money seem to come up. For centuries Amazonian Indians have been the object of the "abilitation method" (*habilitación*): the *patrón* provides food and tools and the Indian has to work for free (sometimes for a lifetime) to get rid of the loan with extremely high interest rates.

The "stealing of culture and knowledge" is a very important hurde for any foreign scholar: very often indians believe that all of their empiric knowledge will be written down, published and so "exploited"; the white scientist gaining a significant amount of money (and converting into millionaire), while there is nothing left for themselves. What has true roots gets ridiculously transformed by the Indian's imagination.

⁶ A Collection of Shipibo myths can be found in GARCIA RIVEIRO 1993 (Shipibo-Konibo and Spanish) and the appendix of GEBHART-SAYER 1987 (German). A brief but profound analysis about the myths and their intercultural content can be found in ILLIUS 1994b (Shipibo and German).

⁷ This points towards a strange relation of inferiority and superiority. The Shipibo seem to be used by the Inca and later by the white man like tools or domesticated animals. By the way Shipibo often call other Amazonian ethnic groups *inábo*, which literally means “pet animals” – it is not surprising that they feel themselves inferior to the Inca, as if they were the pets and in the same way superior to other groups, which then are regarded as the Shipibo’s pets.

⁸ For the spelling of Shipibo-Konibo words we follow the normalized alphabet as pointed out in CORTEZ MONDRAGÓN 2001 instead of following a more phonetic approach.

⁹ *Pishtácu* is a Kechua word and seems to refer to a quite old andean myth about a vampire-like demon. Apparently, in the andean region the reference of the *Pishtácu* to the modern white man is not drawn. However, all over the upper Amazon basin, the reference appears, making it sometimes perilous for white tourists to travel without guide in more remote areas. The *Pishtako*’s concept of taking away human fat and organs give way to a lot of secondary myths, for example that airplanes work only when lubricated with human fat or that white people with small genital organs can get a transplantation of a big (!) Shipibo penis. Some truth might be hidden within: there might be a black market for human organs (referring more to liver and lung than to genitals) and a privileged place to get “fresh organs for free” could be the remote jungle.

¹⁰ *Ayawaska* is usually cooked mixing water with at least two plants, the stem of the non parasite liana *banisteriopsis caapi* and leaves of *psychotria viridis*, though many alternative or additional recipes are possibly used, depending on the individual’s ways. The word “ayawaska” is Kechua and means literally “the vine of the dead” and is used throughout the upper Amazon; however, quite every ethnic groups use a denomination in their language, for example *kamarampi* in Ashéninka or *oni* in Shipibo-Konibo. Detailed information about its recipes and chemistry can be found in RÄTSCH 1997 or COLPRON 1998.

Almost every male Indian has tried *ayawaska* at least once, save the growing fraction of strict evangelists. There is a big group of mainly male Indians who drink ayawaska quite regularly but do not practice healing or bewitching. The final healer-witches, about one out of 50 males, have undergone a long and arduous time of abstinence or isolation in social, alimenticial, sexual and and psychic means. See also GEBHART-SAYER 1987, ILLIUS 1987, 1994a and MORIN 1998. A more endemic and unquestionably more prosaic explication about the *ayawaska* art is given in AREVALO VALERA 1986.

¹¹ As one can see for example in the development of the *kené*: although exclusively produced by women who seldom or never drink ayawaska, the designs represent a basic aesthetic form perceived by an culturally adapt ayawaska drinker. The ‘translation’ from drug experience to handicraft was done by the *meraya*, the master healer, today rare if not even non-existing. The *meraya* sang *keneki iká*, songs to call the designs and then he cut what he saw on tree barks which he handed over to the women (See ILLIUS 1987, GEBHART-SAYER 1985:12).

¹² These creations stand between the metaphor and the neologism. Many spanish words are incorporated in Shipibo tongue as such neologisms (*ashemis joni*: teacher; *jema koshibo*: village authorities, etc.). The neologisms used in song seem much more lyrical and metaphorical, i.e.: *yami ewa roona* (“mighty sounding metal”=airplane), *koman bimi joyota* (“line of [tree-species] nuts”=machine gun bullets), *inkan pino shetá* (“Inca-colibri’s beak”=pen), *yami yesbkeyeshketai* (“quickly spinning metal”=tape recorder), etc.

¹³ A deceased mestizo healer-witch from Pucallpa taught me a song which called for the Christian saint San Pedro to come down and convert all present personnel (the healer-witch, his human disciples *and* spiritual entities) into robots which then dismantle the “enemy spirits”. He also bestowed a division of paratroopers to surprise the enemy at home.

¹⁴ See ILLIUS 1994b: This syntax also extends over paragraphs or side-stories. Many features like contrasting characters and specific parallelisms have to be followed.