

SONG PATTERNS AND SUNG DESIGNS: THE INVENTION OF TRADITION AMONG AMAZONIAN INDIANS AS A RESPONSE TO RESEARCHERS' INQUIRIES.

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abstract:

The Shipibo-Konibo are an Amazonian indigenous group in Eastern Peru. During centuries they have had contact with missionaries, settlers, exploiters and researchers. Shipibo-Konibo are very popular among researchers of various areas as well as among tourists. The cause for this popularity may lie in the combination of easy geographic accessibility, spectacular artwork, and the practice of "shamanism" including a hallucinogenic drug (*ayawaska*). Especially "ayawaska shamanism" and related topics have been studied extensively during the last three decades. The ritual complex around *ayawaska* includes magical songs. Visions induced by the drug often mirror the quality of the indigenous group's "traditional" geometric designs. During the 1980s, German anthropologists proposed that Shipibo "shamans" could sing the designs as if they were coded music, not unlike a notation; and by singing "pattern songs", they could evoke corresponding designs in their visionary drug experience. This hypothesis was not only accepted in the scientific community, but even more enthusiastically in popular literature and in the end by Shipibo-Konibo people themselves: Nowadays, many Indians present these ideas as a core "tradition of their tribe" – and researchers can observe and record many opportunities of its actual practice. However, according to newer studies (see references), this concept was not a part of Shipibo-Konibo life before it was introduced by anthropologists.

Presenting this example I will point out how research (fieldwork, publications, teaching) itself can influence an entire indigenous group to re-invent their "tradition" (which thereafter "has always been there") in order to obtain and maintain their social position as a preferred target group for researchers (and tourists coming in their footsteps). This example underlines how "target groups" for research may actively shape their history and "traditions" as a response to researchers' inquiries. They efficiently construct themselves as "interesting" and therefore may obtain funding, foster tourism, and be invited around the world as "singing artist shamans".

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1. Introduction

The Shipibo-Konibo (or Shipibo) are an indigenous group comprising about 45.000 individuals, who dwell mainly on the shores of the Ucayali river in eastern Peru, in the western Amazonian rainforest lowlands. They are the biggest and only fluvial group of the Pano linguistic family. The Shipibo are well-known because of their fine artwork, manifesting especially in elaborate geometric patterns (called *kené* or *kené*) applied to textiles, ceramics and carved wooden items. Since around 1965¹, much research was done among them, in different disciplines like archaeology, anthropology, or linguistics; also ethnomedical research has been conducted on the group, mainly regarding the medical or "shamanic" use of plants, most prominently the hallucinogenic brew *ayawaska* (called *nishi* or *oni* in Shipibo-Konibo language).

Because of their easy accessibility (the regional capital city of Pucallpa can easily be reached on road or by airplane, and many Shipibo settlements can be visited within one-day boat-trips from Pucallpa), in the second half of the 20th century, the Shipibo suffered a relative oversaturation with researchers doing fieldwork, at least compared to neighbouring groups like the Kukama, Asháninka, Yine or Kakataibo, although Kukama and Asháninka both count with larger populations. During the 50ies and 60ies, the archaeologists Harry Tschopik and Donald Lathrap (1970) drew attention to their artwork, and Peter Roe (1982) worked intensely on Shipibo artwork and mythology during the 70ies. In the 80ies, Jacques Tournon (2002) started to do ethnobotanical fieldwork, Bruno Illius (1987) conducted research on Shipibo shamanism, and Angelika Gebhart-Sayer (1987) undertook a synthesis of artwork, music and shamanism/healing which had a wide response among other researchers. Since then, many studies have been done especially on the complex around arts and shamanism.

2. The Role of Music

Among the Shipibo, as well as most neighbouring indigenous groups, music is an important issue, especially when it comes to curing. There is some evidence that already before the rubber boom between circa 1870 and 1920, songs and theatrical performance was maybe the most important aspect of curing rituals, which may have included many processes which are rare these days. It appears, for example, that possession by or transformation into animals played a much higher role then, and music, specifically songs², were the preferred mode of communication with these animals, and also the only possibility for animals or spirits who took possession of the healer could express their message among the human listeners.

However, there is no clear distinction between magical and non-magical songs in Shipibo terminology and understanding. Also songs performed at drinking parties or for courtship maintain a certain degree of magical energy, as people are viewed as animals in the songs' lyrics and the performance itself targets a certain manipulation of the current lived world (in order to have your desired partner fall in love with you, for example, or singing for the companionship of the legendary "hidden" Shipibo who they call *chaikoni jonibo* and who are known to appear at drinking feasts where especially good singers are performing). There are also many songs which are said to have a certain effects on a person sung to, like songs for attracting fish or game animals, for "curing" somebody to become a good hunter or a better artist, and so on. Finally, and still apart from what we would understand as "magical" or "medical" songs performed for

¹ A crucial event for this interest was the publication of Burroughs and Ginsberg's popular book *Yagé Letters* in 1963. There the authors describe their experiences they lived when taking *ayawaska* in Pucallpa, eastern Peru. Of course, also famous books by Castaneda (1968) and Harner (ed., 1973) drew many experience-seekers towards "indigenous drugs", into the Peruvian rainforests and thereafter to the Shipibo people.

² Illius (1987: 126, 157) argues that also the nowadays almost unknown musical bow *jonoronati* served for the communication between the healer and his spiritual allies or enemies.

healing purposes, there is certain historical evidence of the *mochai* ritual, which is not anymore performed either. The *mochai* is almost unknown to anthropological studies about Shipibo history, and seems to have comprised a collective adoration to the Sun, the "curing" of sun or moon in cases of eclipse, and in certain cases, the summoning of delicately powerful animal-human double beings called *simpibo jonibo*. The core of this ritual were the *mochai* songs.³

In healing rituals, the importance of music is rather obvious, because songs are performed in any case where healing occurs. The most discrete performance is the whistling (*koxonti*) of certain melodies in order to "charge" a carrier substance (usually a cigar, a tobacco pipe, a perfume, or any remedy to be administered to a patient) with the song's power. Therefore, the melody is whistled, the object held close to the mouth, and the song's lyrics are *thought* by the healer during this performance. When the "charged" object is then used (smoked, applied, ingested), the magical song's power should unfold and cause the intended effects. This "charging", *koxonti*, can also be executed with singing and pronouncing the lyrics, but this is rather seldom (cf. Olsen 1996: 259-60 on the Warao *hoa* songs).

3. 'Ayawaska Shamanism'

Another option is the directed singing towards the patient (or victim). This is most often performed during curing sessions, when *ayawaska* is ingested. The healer will wait until the drug takes effect and then start with his⁴ songs. In Shipibo contexts, usually three categories of songs are used, the *bená* (derived from artistic songs with a specific descending melodic model in two sections), *mashá* (derived from the round-dance music sung at drinking parties, with a strict repetition section and consequent four-beat phrasing) and *ikaro* (imported from the north by Kichwa-, Kukama- and Spanish-spoken settlers together with the use of *ayawaska* with different melodic and rhythmic features. *Ikaros* forms are exclusively sung in *ayawaska* sessions). These song categories can change with each song; which musical form is chosen, depends on the individual. Some healers may sing more *ikaro*-type songs, others may sing mainly *bená*, for example.

A third possibility for the application of music in healing rituals is the setting most common when westerners take part in the session: not only the healer (and maybe his apprentices) ingest *ayawaska*, but also the participants, or patients. In these cases, usually the healer leads the voice in the same way as described above, but sometimes participants may enter the music humming, whistling or trying to follow the healer's song in unison, or even singing along and maybe performing own songs simultaneously with the healer, in case of "advanced students" (and in case the healer allows this).

In all three cases, the healer whistles or sings determined musical sequences he chose in order to pursue a certain process. However, it is not obvious, which melodic, rhythmic or dynamic features are related to which processes (like summoning allies, calling upon divine forces or praying, scaring away negative influences, cleaning diseased parts of the body, or fighting enemy healers or sorcerers). Every healer has learned a certain repertoire of song melodies which are sometimes taken from songs outside the curing context, sometimes learned or adapted from teachers (usually a family member: father, grandfather or uncle) and sometimes made up by the healer himself. Therefore, every single healer uses a different repertoire of melodies. Also the singing style differs from one individual to the other. Some sing in very high-pitched registers,

³ The author recorded eleven *mochai* songs by different singers. There can be found three categories or purposes of *mochai* singing: (i) adoration to the rising sun, summoning the sun or "healing" sun or moon during eclipses; (ii) a religious ceremony of collective prayer which is not necessarily directed to the sun, but to meeting with the world of more powerful beings like the *inka* and their counterparts, the *simpibo jonibo*; and (iii) the application of *mochai* songs within curing rituals in order to perform especially difficult tasks of curing on a patient who is seriously ill.

⁴ I use male forms when referring to the healers, because in my survey, 93% of healers were males. Females also embark on important duties in Western Amazonian medical systems, but they are rarely involved as *médicas* who cure by singing and contacting non-human beings.

some prefer intense nasalisation, some sing fairly fast tempi, and so on, while others do not. Despite this individual stylistic freedom, some generalisations can be undertaken. High-pitched falsetto singing, for example, usually indicates that the singer is in contact with powerful divine beings who perform in very high pitches themselves. However, falsetto singing is not a necessary prerequisite to be in contact with such entities. Some healers also apply voice masking, depending on the entities they are in contact with, so that this entity seems to lend her voice to the singer – however, it is still the "translated song" produced by the singer, which we – the audience – can hear, because he still uses a human (Shipibo) melody and rhythm and in most cases pronounce human (Shipibo) language in his lyrics. The communication with the entities is evidenced in the masked voice, with the singer imitating the singing style of the corresponding non-human beings, whose singing only he can perceive (cf. Brabec de Mori 2007). The song appears as a "bodily-exterior manifestation of [...] knowledge and power" (Gow 2001: 144).

4. The Emergence of the 'Aesthetic Therapy'

The song categories mentioned above, with their individual interpretations, represent in fact a very precise art and a certain craftsmanship. The singers have to learn melodies and common phrases from their teachers or other singers in their community, and then have to train in long retreats how to contact non-human beings. When they conclude their year-long training period, they should be able to contact these non-human people at will and sing together with them in order to cure (or to inflict). However, these songs were not analysed in broad comparative studies, but taken in fragments and out of their contexts, translated without the necessary profound understanding of metaphors and codes, to be included in the Shipibo's "worldview" (as if this would exist as a singular).

Emerging from the 19th century, during the 20th century, ethnologists tried to interpret, compare and understand the meaning of the elaborate geometric designs Shipibo women produce on ceramics, textiles, and men carve into wooden items. The heritage from the 19th century was *Kulturkreislehre* and a general diffusionist understanding. Tessmann (1928) expresses, that the Shipibo would only imitate an art invented by "higher civilisations" before them, and they would not understand anything of their art's meaning. In the 20th century, the designs were constant object to interpretations, and it was mentioned very seldom that in they could actually be "only" *art pour l'art*. *Naturvölker* were not supposed to produce art without function. Gebhart-Sayer (1987) also clung to the idea, that an assumed original meaning was lost, and only a few "Schamanen" would still know how to interpret these ancient codes. She tried to find a connection between these designs, the intake of *ayawaska*, and the performance of medical or magical songs, and called her hypothesis "una terapia estética" (Gebhart-Sayer 1986).

With this "aesthetic therapy", Gebhart-Sayer assumes that specialist "Schamanen" could sing certain songs to obtain certain visions of designs within their *ayawaska* experience. Vice versa, they could intone certain songs when looking at certain painted or embroidered designs, in a way of reproducing a hidden code, specifically a coded song from the design. These "singable" designs" or "song patterns" would now play an important role in healing sessions: the healer would perceive the patient's body covered by (usually invisible) body patterns *yora kené*, and then alter these body patterns by singing the appropriate song for the appropriate pattern to appear on the patient's body.

Surprisingly, this hypothesis which was found to be a speculative European idea and lacks any evidence in history or recent practice among Shipibo people (Brabec de Mori and Mori Silvano de Brabec 2009a, 2009b), could be observed in the field and entered into ethnographic reports, for example by Martin (2005) or Rittner (2007), who presented healers who actually *do* cover their patients with embroidered textiles before singing corresponding pattern songs while they are under influence of *ayawaska*, of course together with their (Western) patients. Thus they employ a healing technique they readily explain, based on "healing patterns", "design songs" and "visions"

of sung designs during *ayawaska* influence. This practice can be observed mainly in the native community of San Francisco de Yarinacocha, where most tourists and inexperienced researchers reach out to meet Shipibo people for the first time.

5. Origins, authenticity, and tradition

Around 1950, the Shipibo did not by any means try to represent anything especially "indigenous" in their daily life. They usually tried to find a way to live in the best possible position between their customs and the process of assimilation and adaptation to the growingly dominant fluvial *mestizo* (or *peruano*) society.

However, there were some tendencies establishing, which led to a re-indigenisation of most Peruvian rainforest societies: (i) the missionary-linguistic labours of the *Summer Institute of Linguistics* (established 1947-2002 in Yarinacocha) among most indigenous groups; (ii) the land reform under General Velasco in the early 1970ies which granted communal land titles for native village, the *comunidades nativas*, (iii) the growing interest of anthropologists especially in the Shipibo-Konibo,⁵ and therefore a confrontation with many questions regarding "traditions", "original culture", "knowledge of the past elders", and so on, and finally (iv) since Bill Burroughs, but massively for about three decades now, an invasion by "individual tourists", "eco-tourists", "spiritual tourists" (Jervis, forthcoming) and "shaman's-pupil-tourists".

All these tendencies helped to manipulate the indigenous people's social position in favorable ways compared to the fluvial *mestizo*, who were almost entirely ignored. This favourable position was, however, only available for people and villages who declared themselves as "indigenous" and showed this, by representing in language use (for the SIL), in economic communal labour (for Velasco's SINAMOS land titles), in being very knowledgeable (for anthropologists) and practice preferably mystic or spiritual, "primitive", spectacular, and impressing event for the tourists – the more "indigenous", the better.

In a series of publications⁶, my wife and I have contributed in empirically showing which elements of today's "Shipibo culture" (which is a singular) may be traced in the past and history of the fluvial Pano of Ucayali (which is a plural), and which elements can be understood as individual creations (which are a plural) but are presented as "the original tradition of Shipibo people" (which is a singular).

There it appears, that there are many items changing, being lost, and being created, although meanwhile, the illusion of "the original tradition of Shipibo people" is maintained (by missionaries, Indians, researchers, and tourists in a surprisingly consistent mutual agreement. Everybody wins, if the "tradition" is as modern as possible, but still reaches into the past via "grandparents who already sang like this", "authentic or original traditions of our people", "elements of a millennial culture", and renderings like these, which are reported by the very indigenous people themselves. Especially in San Francisco de Yarinacocha, a sort of unofficial "school" has emerged, where people train to make money with the visitors: they are "*chamanes*", "*artesanos*", "*artistas*", or, in the most promising cases, a combination⁷ of all.

⁵ This immense interest in this indigenous group can be explained by combining the parameters mentioned above: (i) easy accessibility, (ii) "traditional" consumption of a spectacular drug, (iii) elaborate artwork which is considered aesthetically appealing also by uneducated Westerners, (iv) some spectacular myths like they would have possessed "indigenous books", the "aesthetic therapy", the hundreds of "meanings" of their geometric arts, etc etc.

⁶ See Brabec de Mori and Mori Silvano de Brabec (2009a, 2009b), and Brabec de Mori (2007, and forthcoming).

⁷ The Shipibo *ayawaska*-using specialists were mostly male, until in recent years, a "gender mainstreaming" (probably triggered by tourist's preferences) is taking place, and female *ayabusqueros* emerge. However, all *ayabusqueros* would call themselves *médicos* within an indigenous context. If they call themselves *chamanes*, this is a secure indicator that they aim towards Western visitors. Further on, the distinction between *artesanos* and *artistas* is very interesting (cf. Brabec de Mori and Mori Silvano de Brabec 2009a): female *artesanos* produce handicraft, with a medium size embroidered sheet sold at around USD 35.- (2008 price), while male painters produce art paintings sold at around

These changes include but are not exhausted by the following:

a) Healing songs outside the *ayawaska* complex, like these including theatrical performances and possession by animals, were altogether dismissed among Shipibo.

b) The *ayawaska* complex was quickly adapted: what once was marginal and scary, got most interest from visitors (and therefore gifts and money) and so it was placed in the centre of "Shipibo culture". Not only the respected healer would drink the brew, but all presents, including visitors. The collective hallucinatory experience (sometimes including collective singing) was declared a millennial tradition.

c) The *kené* designs were adapted to market strategies and therefore simplified and standardized (cf. Lathrap 1976). The questions of researchers about possible "meanings" of the designs were reflected and many Shipibo-Konibo started to present answers to such questions.

d) The songs performed in *ayawaska* sessions were connected to *kené* designs answering Gebhart-Sayer's questions. Herlinda Agustín from CN San Francisco de Yarinacocha had worked with Gebhart-Sayer and is now the most prominent protagonist in "healing patterns" (cf. Martin 2005).

e) This combined multimedia package was then declared a millennial tradition: the (new) *ayawaska* drinking session, the (aesthetically renovated) *kené* art, and the (never existing) songs which would evoke designs or designs which would encode songs were therefore not invented recently (which is an interesting advance in my point of view), but have ever existed.

6. Tradition and the structure of time

In most indigenous societies, "tradition" (or "originality", "authenticism", "historical legacy", etc., etc.) can not be expressed in the vernacular language.

There are many indications, that the structure of time in indigenous societies does not necessarily follow a linear or even a circular idea of *advancing* time. In Shipibo Society, for example, the so called "mythical past" can be viewed much better as a "distant present" (see e.g. Illius 1999). Synchronicity is a very important aspect in Shipibo healing and witchcraft practice, and through the analysis of curing songs, many "synchronicisms" can be observed.

The idea of a flexible past is perfectly suitable to such a "synchronic time structure", where actually people (and the world itself) grow older, but where the past and future are actually present, anyway, in distant regions, which can be visited by trained specialists (with or without the ingestion of drugs).

A certain conflict emerges from the translation of for example *moatian ipaokani* in Shipibo-Konibo to Spanish and other European languages. This term would be interpreted as "as they lived/acted in mythical past" in orthodox understanding, but much more transports a meaning like "because this happens in a remote place, it effects what we know or do here". *Moatian ipaokani* cannot be translated anyway.⁸

The historical inevitability of the Western interpretation of time (there is an objective past which had actually happened, and a intersubjective, historical interpretation of this past in the present) is not compatible with this generative model of time, where any past can be constructed from a manipulation of contents in the present. Gow (2001) showed how the changes in so called "myths" among the Piro (a neighbouring group to the Shipibo) that happen during the actual

USD 350.- each, although labour, material and creativity investments are comparably the same. This distinction between "high art" and "low-level handicraft" is a recent western import (art painters were absent among Shipibo before around 2000) and sheds a doubtful light on the assumed equity of gender in Western society.

⁸ moa-tian // i-pao-kan-ni. Root: "yet/already" – Temp: synchr. ("when") // Root: "be/do" – Mod: distance indicator (?) – Mod: pluralisation "we/they" – Temp: distance (?). I marked with (?) those particles which are understood as "indicators for mythical past" but which are not emically predetermined in a temporal sense.

performance of telling within a specific situation, altogether alter the past of the group, independently from the historical archive of Western visitors (mainly missionary).

The Shipibo-Konibo protagonists who nowadays sing songs which can be transformed into designs and vice versa, of course are inventing this from scrap. However, through their practice and their pouring of meaning into the dimension of *moatian ipaokani* by declaring that "this is the original tradition of Shipibo people", this idea is slowly transforming into reality and can nowadays even be honestly observed by visitors (although still exclusively in San Francisco – I suppose the practice will quickly spread through the Shipibo territories).

The understanding of past in Shipibo philosophy allows for a complete freedom in maintaining, transmitting, creating and changing of "traditions".

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