

Varieties of Amazonian Shamanism

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The penetration of the Amazon region by the great religious movements of Europe and Africa began with the first phases of colonial domination, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The initial influence to be felt was Iberian Catholicism (the religion of the conquerors), which spread along the rivers as missions sprang up here and there. This period of missionary activity continued for over a century, bringing with it a host of consequences, most notably waves of epidemics that killed millions of natives. Nevertheless, an initial "syncretic alliance" was forged in the missions between shamanism and Catholicism.

From another quarter came legions of black slaves, exiled to the New World during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to replace the decimated native workforce; with them they brought their own religions and religious practices, which they transplanted, in a more or less transformed state, to all corners of the South American continent. The resulting Afro-American religions were practiced secretly by broad masses and in this way were fused with Amerindian religions (the case of *pagelança* in Brazil) and with "official" forms of Catholicism (*umbanda* and *candomblé*, among others).

The nineteenth century contributed its share of religious movements to the mix, primarily from Europe (Kardecian spiritism is a case in point) and from North America, with its established Churches and the charismatic Protestant sects, most notably the Pentecostals. By opening itself to the syncretism of Amerindian and Afro-American influences, Catholicism itself gradually took on a "popular" dimension. In the more recent past, the appearance of numerous spiritist and mystical sects, as well as of secret brotherhoods and societies, has only added to an already multifarious religious panorama. In a territory still partially "virgin," the field was open to whomever could convert the greatest number of souls. The evolution of religious practices in these regions has thus proven to

be linked inextricably to the prodigious mixing [*métissage*] of cultures and religions that has taken place in the missions and cities over the course of the last four hundred years. Strangely enough, shamanism is one of the native institutions that has best survived this conglomeration. At the present time it is in fact enjoying a period of renewal and revival, whether it be in "traditional" (as its practitioners claim) forms or more syncretically, as can be witnessed on the outskirts of the various Amazonian megalopolises. This urban (or folk) shamanism, which has found a means to realize its new purposes in a combination of the worship of Catholic saints and African animism, is in a period of vast growth, not only in the Amazon region but throughout all of Latin America. And although it is accurate to situate shamanism's growth within the context of this colossal mixing of imported religions and cultures, one must not at the same underestimate its native foundation (itself shamanic); it is shamanism with which the local populations identify, well beyond their adherence to any particular "official" religion. Although today's urban shamans gladly flaunt their Catholicism, their practices in fact have only a distant relationship to its dogma.

Native Shamans

The fascination of the urban and Andean shamanic milieu with the forest and its inhabitants is well known. As a rule, urban and Andean shamans attribute immense powers to their forest-dwelling colleagues; they frequently visit them and have set up vast networks of shamanic exchange not only in Peru but in Colombia and Ecuador. In Brazil many mixed-blood [*métis*, *mestizo*] shamans have adopted native methods and even take up temporary residence in the forests to learn the shamanistic arts (Galvão, 1952). Indeed there are few shamans who do not claim to have had at least one native instructor or who do not acknowledge the native origin of their knowledge. The Indian shamans not only play an initiatory role but are known to make occasional trips to the cities to practice their medicine. In addition, the assumption of shamanic duties by a person of mixed blood entails a whole host of behavioral changes, including the adoption of a "cosmology" that calls for the wearing of native clothes and ornaments, and even the carrying out of certain native practices, notably in relation to the forest. Equally, the mixed-blood practitioner usually makes a study

of several native languages, which he sprinkles haphazardly into his repertoire of shamanic chants (*icaros*). From this point of view, urban shamanism can be seen as the meeting point of a multitude of shamanic styles and traditions emanating from all corners of the forest. Relying on their own experience, these urban shamans have formed shamanic networks in the heart of their neighborhoods and in some places have developed “catalogues” for classifying Amazon society according to shamanic specialties; and these classifications have become a model in their urban world. Thus one can now speak of “aquatic,” “incantatory,” “defensive,” and other shamanisms (Chaumeil, 1988).

Native shamanism has also played, and continues to play, a crucial role in the blossoming of numerous messianic sects in the Amazon region: indeed Indian shaman-prophets have been the driving force behind most of them. In the nineteenth century they helped develop the Guyanese (*Carib*) messianic movement and in South America the Vaupès and Rio Negro (Tucano-Arawak) sects; in the twentieth century, the various Ticuna and Gé messianisms have relied on native shamans (Chaumeil, 1991).

In addition, since the end of the nineteenth century, various native-inspired syncretic sects have flourished to the point of becoming veritable “Churches” themselves. The original basis for many of these sects was an insurgent shamanism; later the insurgents looked for the support of imported religions (such as Catholicism and Protestantism), to which they partially conformed. Beginning as itinerant preachers, many of the charismatic leaders (shamans or taken for such) settled into small communities where they gradually rose to the stature of “Church”-founding religious leaders (this was the case of the *alleluia* movement of Guyana and, more recently, of the *Saint Cross* movement of Amazonian Brazil and Peru). Therefore, although the contributions of Iberian and African religious currents are considerable, the importance of the native element in the religion and folk shamanism of the Amazon cannot be emphasized enough.

The Mixed-Blood Curanderos

It should first be noted that the population explosion in the cities of the Amazon did not take place until the rubber boom of the years 1880–1914. Attracted by the lure of gain, several waves of immigrants broke upon the Amazon region; originating in such diverse

places as the Pacific littoral, the Andean foothills, and the overpopulated states of northeastern Brazil, the immigrants built factories, sailed up secondary tributaries in search of highly valued latex and, in the course of their explorations, encountered many extremely isolated ethnic groups. The real beginnings of urban shamanism can be traced to this period.

It is possible in a general way to identify three broad categories of practitioners, corresponding to the broad title *curandero* (shaman-healer). The first category, consisting of the *vegetalistas* or *pagé* (*pajé*, *payé*), is quite close to the Indian shamans. Their practice is characterized by the use of tobacco and hallucinogenic drugs, in particular the creeping vine *ayahuasco* or *yagé* (*Banisteria caapi*), which is used in initiations and cures. *Ayahuasco*, which contains several powerful psychoactive ingredients, occupies a special place in shamanism and in South AmerIndian mythologies in general. Indeed in Peru the term "*ayahuasco* shamanism" comes up readily when speaking of the *vegetalistas*. These *vegetalistas*, however, do not form a single group but are divided into various specializations and grades (Chaumeil, 1991). The *banco*, for example, generally stands at the top of the hierarchy. The word *banco* can be translated equally well as "bench" or "bank," because of the *banco's* ability to unite (in or on himself) a large quantity of spirits. The *sumé* or *pagé-sacaca*, a sort of aquatic shaman, has the ability to travel at high speeds under water without getting wet. He is like a submarine, able to surface anywhere he pleases and then to disappear without a trace; this talent makes him a powerful and much-feared shaman. The same technique is widespread among the native shamans, who often conceive of water as a gaseous substance similar to air.

The second category, which contains those who heal by prayer, seems to be tied to the traditions of popular Catholicism (*oracionistas* in Peru, *benzadores* or *rezadores* in Brazil).

Finally there are the *espiritistas* (close to spiritist sects) who rely on the intervention of spirits to effect cures. The *rozacruzistas* (a kind of neo-shamanist movement based on written texts, and whose practices rely directly on books of magic and the symbolism of the cross) fall into this category. As a general rule, the swarms of phyto-therapists and other herbalists crowding the ghettos are distinguished from the *curanderos* who are not, strictly speaking, experts in plant-based medicine.

It goes without saying that such a list has only a minimal typo-

logical value; there is nothing airtight about the classifications (indeed they often overlap). As one Peruvian shaman was quoted: "I work with plants, with chemicals, with incantations and spiritism, with red, green and black magic, and with Saint Cyprien [patron saint of the *curanderos*]" (San Roman, 1979: 29). Thus nothing prevents a *vegetalista* from practicing spiritism, and vice versa. The composite character of urban shamanism is once again in evidence here.

If in most respects the *curanderos* (notably the *vegetalistas*) make use of therapeutic techniques similar to those employed by their native colleagues, and if there are many valid analogies between the way shamanism functions in the urban and native milieus (for instance, the casting of spells between neighborhoods almost exactly reproduces the logic of intercommunity conflicts in the countryside), then it is in the realm of religious symbols and areas of authority, of ethical precepts and final ends, that the most significant differences between the two forms of shamanism are expressed. For example, the introduction of the principle figures of the Christian pantheon (Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saints and angels) into the array of the shaman's auxiliary spirits has fundamentally modified some aspects of shamanism by imbuing it with a moral dimension that was not necessarily present in its traditional form. In the case of illness, it is no longer enough simply to turn the aggression back on its presumed author: now one must first convince the Christian God and his principal emissaries of the moral ends of the steps being taken. What is most noteworthy here is that in comparison with the native model, in which the *curandero* seeks his legitimacy through the approval of the community, he must now seek his approval from the gods. With the introduction of the Christian pantheon and popular Catholicism, we have perhaps entered an era of "moralizing shamanism."

There has also been a change in the use of symbols and therapeutic accessories. For example, some shamans have likened the teachings of the Bible to the use of hallucinogens: both are endowed with the same visionary power. In some cases, pages of the Bible have been used to treat an unidentified illness. Also, the cross has gradually supplanted tobacco as a therapeutic agent. In addition, numerous *curanderos* attend church regularly and have candles burned at the foot of the cross, hoping to receive, in exchange, knowledge of the cause of illnesses. Others take part in church services in order to "commune" directly with Christ. By

participating in the ceremony, the shaman aims not only to have himself incorporated into the body of the divinity but to partake of its *knowledge*, which is identical to the knowledge emanating, in a more traditional context, from the spirits freed by the hallucinogenic plants. There is a definite parallel between these two “cannibalizing” processes: both strive to augment one’s knowledge-power through the ritual consumption of a substance either derived from the divinity or taking its place (the spirits from hallucinogenic plants are often considered to be on equal footing with the figures at the summit of the Christian pantheon). In this sense, the ritual consecration of the host can be likened to the consecration of hallucinogens performed by native and mixed-blood shamans. At the same time, the shaman’s own paraphernalia is modified by his use of Christian images or figurines of saints (*encantos*) in cures; placed like leeches on the infected parts of the body, they “suck” the evil out (replacing the traditional shamanic “suction”). Altar tables (*mesas*), on which various fetishes are placed, and card games (*naipes*), also figure in the therapeutic panoply of Amazon urban shamans. The *naipes*, used in Spain in divination rites as early as the fourteenth century, were introduced to the New World in the sixteenth century by Spanish missionaries (Dobkin de Rios, 1984: 89).

Finally, the shaman’s prospects of material rewards have been fundamentally altered by urban shamanism. Whereas in the native setting the practice of the shamanic arts has rarely been a way to make a fortune (at best a few social privileges are to be gained), the case is quite different in urban centers: here shamans often impose huge honoraria on their patients, independent of the effectiveness of the cure. Indeed in cities and neighborhoods where individual success (whether it be social, financial, even romantic) is the supreme value, entire political and economic careers are at stake in shamanic practice (with all the dangers to shamanism this implies). At the end of this article we will return to question of the role played by shamanic themes in the success of political candidates on the regional, national and even international scene.

New “Shamanic Sects”

As was stated above, all over the Amazon region and in the great cities of South America, there has been, over the last few decades, an emergence and expansion of new shamanic sects and ritual

practices. This is particularly true in Brazil (in the Acre territory) with the *Santo Daime* and *União do Vegetal* sects, and in Colombia (in the Sibundoy valley) with the therapeutic community of Ingano-Kamsa.

The common denominator among these various sects is the importance accorded to *ayahuasco* in ritual practice; its use, at least among the rural populations of the Brazilian Amazon, dates back to the beginnings of the rubber industry. *Ayahuasco* use gradually became part of the religious practices in regional capitals and ultimately gave birth to the cult of *Santo Daime* in 1920, near the Rio Branco (in the state of Acre). According to tradition, the origin of the sect goes back to an encounter between a party of men searching for black rubber and native shamans, who introduced them to the use of the hallucinogen in ritual practice. One of them, Raimundo Irineu Serra, who became the leader of the movement, conceived a "visionary religion" based on the taking of *ayahuasco* and on healing. Today this "religion" comprises a strict body of doctrine, combining various elements of spiritism, Protestant evangelism, popular Catholicism, and neo-African animism (Monteiro, 1988). However, there are many similarities between this sect and the tradition of *ayahuasco* shamanism observed in other parts of the Amazon. The major difference between the two cults is the highly institutionalized character of the *curanderos* of *Santo Daime* as compared to the more informal structure of its urban variant.

Recently another *ayahuasco* sect, called the *União do Vegetal* (UDV), appeared in the same region. Founded in Porto Veho in 1962, this sect cropped up here and there throughout the states of Rondonia and Acre before ultimately taking root in the major cities of Brazil – including Brasilia, Manaus, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo – where it continues to gain new adherents every day. The UDV is characterized by a strict hierarchical structure, a complex liturgy recited during the *ayahuasco* ritual, and a mythology based on both the Old Testament and Andean civilization, for example Inca elements (Henman, 1986). Although the UDV, too, has much in common with popular shamanism, its use of hallucinogens is more tied to ritual purification than to therapeutic ends.

The new shamanic circles that have sprung up in Colombia's Sibundoy valley have a rather different origin. They are an expression of an historic mixing [*métissage*] between Amazon and Andean societies based on two ethnic groups, the Inga and the Kamsa, who specialize in *curanderismo* and in the trade of medicinal and hallu-

cinogenic plants (notably *ayahuasco*). The nomadic Inga have become itinerant healers (something like the Kallahuaya of Bolivia), while the sedentary Kamsa raise their plants and perform their rituals in their homes. In both cases, however, the ultimate source of their shamanism is the same: It comes from the Amazon region, in particular from the Tucano groups (*ayahuasco* specialists par excellence) who live near the Rio Putomayo (Taussig, 1982; Pinzon, 1989). The role of the Inga has been to disperse this Amazonian shamanism throughout the Andes and along the Pacific littoral, from Panama to Venezuela. At the present time the number of followers of the *curanderos* of Sibundoy continues to grow not only in Bogotá but in all the principal cities of Colombia.

A Return Full Circle

Although, as we have seen, the preeminence of Amazonian shamanism is generally recognized in both the rural and urban milieu, the native perception of the situation – i.e., seen from the forest to the city – is often the opposite. Indeed for many native shamans the city, as the juncture of spiritual values and material wealth, exercises an irresistible attraction. In today's urban centers, a double movement of shamanic exchange can be witnessed: from the forest to the city and vice versa. It is therefore not surprising to see a growing number of young natives heading for the cities to study the shamanic arts with a mixed-blood shaman who himself is developing his skills through the study of rural shamanism. These exchanges are part of a new dynamic that is gradually changing both the way the Other is perceived (i.e., how native and mixed-blood [*métis*, *mestizo*] persons look at each other) and the reciprocal perception of ethnic groups among themselves. Through urban shamanism, the natives enter a syncretic world in which popular Catholicism is fused more or less successfully with Amazon religions and traditions. One of the long-term consequences of this exchange will perhaps be a certain uniformity of shamanic practices in the Amazon region; that is, a standardized or "Catholicized" shamanism heavily colored by a moralistic strain (cf. *supra*). This has already been the case with the Mataco shamans of Argentina who have been gradually transformed into "shamans of God," likening their practices to those of the prophets of Holy Scripture (Califano, 1985).

"Surgical" Shamanism

At the same time, in other places native shamans have begun experimenting with new shamanic forms inspired directly by the techniques and achievements of modern medicine. This is the case with the Yagua people of the Peruvian Amazon whom we have been working with for several years. Some of the shamans who belong to this ethnic group have recently perfected a "surgical shamanism," which consists of the removal or restoration of organs by means of a mental operation; only the opening and closing of the ritual are accompanied by traditional shamanistic rites. In the past *ayahuasco* was the indispensable accessory to initiation in shamanic duties; initiation to this new type of cure, by contrast, is accompanied by the use of cocaine. The shamans engaged on this path consider the new therapies extremely difficult to effect. At present a veritable "laboratory" is called for, including "operating room," "surgical lancet," and "syringe;" among the "medical auxiliaries" – beyond the classic auxiliary spirits – such things as "nurses" and "secretaries" are needed. This class of shaman (called the *banco*) is recognized in the hierarchy as superior to all others. The "operation" (the Yagua use the term *yaráramata*, "to operate, open a body") occurs in three phases: The pre-operative phase consists of suction, performed by the shaman, that prepare the patient's body; these are followed by incantations addressed to Christ (The God of the Whites), who alone possesses the power of operating. The operation itself (which is timed) is a process of mental extraction, in which the damaged organ is either replaced or repaired (in the Yagua conception, each organ consists of a bundle of "nerves" that must be "re-welded" or changed, depending on the degree of deterioration); the body must then be "closed" by cauterization of the "wounds" with the help of bits of paper that play the role of "gauze" or "suture sites." In the final, post-operative phase, the shaman's auxiliaries blow on the patient's body to normalize it (like the suction, an eminently shamanic technique). This form of treatment, which the shamans themselves adapted to the modern world by subtly combining traditional and western therapies, has enjoyed great success with a large (and growing) number of patients who come not only from the region (a mixture of Indians and Métis) but from adjoining countries as well (Colombia and Brazil). Native shamanism, thanks to these adaptive capacities and to the cultural mixing [*métissage*] that underlies it, undoubtedly has

Urban Shamans
And Other Amazonian Therapists¹

BRAZIL

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|--|---|
| — <i>pagé (pajé)</i> | shaman (<i>curador</i>)
<i>pagé-sacaca</i> : aquatic shaman
(equivalent to the Peruvian <i>sumé</i> who use
anaconda skin to travel underwater). |
| — <i>benzador, rezador</i>
<i>raizero</i> | use prayers in their cures
“herbalist” (phyto-therapist) |
-

VENEZUELA

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| — <i>payé</i> | shaman
two specialties: <i>soplador</i> = blower;
<i>chupador</i> = sucker |
| — <i>curioso</i> | person generally versed in the therapeutic
arts |
| — <i>iluminado</i> | an “enlightened one” who can consult
spirits either in dream or vision to a thera-
peutic end. |
| — <i>rezador</i> | uses prayers to effect cures. |
| — <i>yerberero</i> | “herbalist” (phyto-therapist) |
| — <i>banco</i> | presides over the therapeutic ritual in the
<i>Maria Lionza</i> sect |
-

PERU

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| — <i>vegetalista</i> | shaman (synonyms: <i>curandero</i> , <i>empirico</i> ,
<i>maestro</i>)
<i>banco</i> : a great shaman, or <i>banco miraya</i>
(highest rank in the shamanic hierarchy)
<i>sumé</i> : aquatic shaman (equivalent to the
Brazilian <i>pagé-sacaca</i>) |
| — <i>oracionista</i> | uses prayers to effect cures |
| — <i>espiritista</i> | a “spirit” who calls upon other spirits to
effect cures |

1. Sources for Brazil: Galvão, 1952; Elizabetsky and Setzer, 1958. Sources for Venezuela: Marquez and Perez, 1983; Pollak and Eltz, 1982. Sources for Peru: Luna, 1986; Regan, 1983; Dobkin de Rios, 1984; San Roman, 1983, 1979; Chaumeil, 1988.

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— <i>perfumero</i>	uses perfumes in his cures (an “aromatic” therapy)
— <i>rosacruz</i> or <i>magioso</i>	uses magic books to effect cures
— <i>pusanguero</i>	specialist in romantic magic
— <i>huesero</i>	specialist in broken and dislocated bones
— <i>suertero/agüero</i>	an “annunciator” who is a divinatory medium
— <i>hierbatero</i>	phyto-therapist

a bright future ahead of it. However, it remains to be seen whether it will still then be possible to speak of such phenomena as shamanic, even if the new practices emanate from “traditional” native shamans, acknowledged as such by their society.

Political Shamanism

The extraordinary success of shamanism in urban areas should not be thought of as limited to its therapeutic role. It is clear that shamanism has now become part of the political life of most Latin American countries. Numerous candidates for major posts have run and won – at least in part – on the basis of their supposed ties, real or imagined, to well-known shamans. In May of 1991, the Peruvian President, Alberto Fujimori, personally invited to Lima the internationally renowned Brazilian healer João Texeira to cure Fujimori of an extremely painful fracture.² Lima’s largest stadium was turned over to the tens of thousands of patients who turned out to be healed along with their President. Although the “miracles” of the Brazilian were disappointing, there was another miracle in store: “Taking up the slack, two statues of the Virgin Mary, located in the port of Callao, near Lima, began to weep. On word of it, the thousands of believers who had been disappointed by the Brazilian miracle-worker rushed to gather before the crying virgins; among them was President Fujimori. He later confessed that he had asked for the Virgin’s help in giving hope to the people.”³

The victory of Zbigniew Tyminsky in the last presidential elections in Poland – much discussed in the Peruvian and international press – supposedly owed something to his regular visits with

2. A. Cisneros, “Lima sous le charme du surnaturel.” *Libération*, May 21, 1991.

3. *Ibid.*

“native tribes” of the Amazon region (Iquitos), where he would go for renewal and “re-springing” [*ressourcer*]. His Peruvian wife, a specialist in homeopathic medicine, is also said to be an adept of *ayahuaso*. Several activists from traditional Polish political parties have labeled him a “medium” who was able to cast a spell over the voters by means of a “mysterious power” he possesses. To counteract his power would have necessitated finding another medium “at least twice as powerful.” These examples eloquently demonstrate – if need be – the exceptional contemporary relevance of a phenomenon that is believed to go back, in its most pure form, to the last societies of hunters and gatherers.

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