

THE MAGIC OF SONG, THE INVENTION OF TRADITION AND
THE STRUCTURING OF TIME AMONG THE SHIPIBO, PERUVIAN AMAZON
(BERND BRABEC DE MORI)

1. Introduction¹

This article is dedicated, with love, respect and gratitude,
to my uncle Armando Sánchez Valles (26/12/1939–29/11/2010).

The Shipibo (official denomination: Shipibo-Konibo) comprise about 45,000 individuals mainly dwelling on the shores of the Ucayali river and its tributaries in eastern Peru, in the Upper Amazonian rainforest. They are the biggest and only fluvial group of the Pano linguistic family. The Shipibo are well known because of their fine artwork, manifesting itself especially in elaborate pattern designs (called *kené* or *kewé*) applied to textiles, ceramics and carved wooden items. Since around 1965, much research has been done among them, in different disciplines like archaeology, anthropology, or linguistics. Ethnomedical research has been extensively conducted on the group, mainly regarding the medical or “shamanic” use of plants, most prominently the hallucinogenic brew *ayawaska* (called *nishi* or *oni* in the Shipibo language).²

Unlike many authors, I neither intend to present here elements of an alleged “original Shipibo culture” nor do I wish to show how the Shipibo adapt themselves to the allegedly “modern”

1 The fieldwork (2001–2007) that forms the basis of this paper was undertaken with the help of the University of Vienna (three travel grants), the British Centre in Pucallpa, the Austrian Academy of Sciences (“DOC” programme) and the Austrian Association for Parapsychology. I wish to thank Christian Huber for essentially contributing with his linguistic expertise, Bruno Illius and Laida Mori Silvano de Brabec for their help.

2 To mention only a few of the most influential authors, cf. Lathrap (1970, 1976) or Myers (2004 [12002]) on archaeology; from Girard (1958) to Roe (1982) or Illius (1987, 1999) on anthropology; Faust (1990 [1973]) or Valenzuela (2003) on linguistics; from Baer (1971) to Tourmon (2002) on ethnomedicine and ethnobotany; and from Karsten (1955) to Jervis (forthcoming) on *ayawaska* use among the Shipibo. For a Pan-Amazonian overview and detailed information about the preparation, use and effects of *ayawaska* see Labate & Araújo (2004).

Western globalising culture. Instead I will overthrow the necessary presuppositions for both of the mentioned perspectives: firstly, that there was a somehow “stable” way of life among the indigenous people before Western influence (this presupposition being a legacy from the 19th century), and secondly, that the only way to survive for indigenous people is to passively adapt to the market, to capitalism and globalisation (this one being a much more “modern” and almost irresistible dogma).

I think that many indigenous people, and the Shipibo in a very representative way, have some great advantages compared to Western society due to their ecological understanding of the world³ and its inherent flexibility and innovative potential. This flexibility also extends to the conceptualisation and structuring of time. In Western understanding, the past seems “solidified”: the common everyday interpretation of time assumes an objective past which had actually happened, and a historical process determined by intersubjective interpretations of remnants of this past in the present. One “true past” is envisioned, and the cause why we cannot penetrate the shroud of mist which blurs its sharpness is only our lack of evidence and a latent insufficiency in research methods or remembrance (which may be overcome one day). In this way, a historical inevitability of the present and somehow also of the future is created. In Shipibo society, on the other hand, it seems that the necessity for “one true past” is not felt, but almost any past may be projected from the present. This constructive process, I shall argue, is not defined by analysing remnants (which are actually rare in both material and intangible forms), but by reflecting and re-creating the present. Maybe the past is left as open as the future. In this context, two indigenous methods seem feasible in improving, or manipulating, the present situation of an individual, a family or the Shipibo as a group identity: (i) specialists in magic, sorcery, and medicine (who call themselves *médicos*) may manipulate the relations between humans and non-humans, therefore effecting a shift in reality

3 “Ecological understanding” refers to a multi-natural cosmos with possibilities of inter-species communication (perspectivism) as formulated by Viveiros de Castro (1997) and others. Here, “ecological” defines the network character of communication rather than a romantic life embedded in nature as suggested by political “ecology” in industrialised countries.

(healing and witchcraft), or (ii), Shipibo protagonists in representing “their culture” may tell new narratives about the past, about their traditions, histories, and ancient knowledge which actually affect their and their kinspeople’s positioning and performance at the market of popularity among tourists and researchers.

In order to investigate these issues, I will first introduce the topic of musical healing as I observed it among the Shipibo compared to how it is represented in most academic and popular literature, extrapolating some differences. The following brief glimpse into some political and social changes during the last few decades among the Shipibo may help to understand how these differences emerged, and will also elucidate the role of the two methods of shaping present reality I mentioned above: magic and narration. Finally, I will show that in Shipibo grammar there are indications to be found that these two methods are not as different from each other as it may seem at the first glance.

2. The everyday magic of music

Among the Shipibo, as with most neighbouring indigenous groups, music is an important issue, especially when it comes to magic or curing. There is some evidence⁴ that before the rubber boom (ca. 1870–1920), songs and theatrical performance were the most important aspects of curing rituals. At that time, such rituals 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, and vocal music was the preferred mode of communication with these animals. Singing was also the only possibility for the animals or spirits who took possession of the performer to express themselves or to transmit their message to the human listeners.⁵

4 Cf. Gow (1994: 109) for the Yine, or my own more recent studies with Kakataibo and Iskobakebo in Brabec de Mori (forthcoming a, forthcoming c).

5 Today, exclusively vocal music and some percussion (like the *shapaja*, a bundle of leaves) are attested to be used in magical performance. Illius (1987: 126, 157) argues that among the Shipibo of former times also the musical bow *jonoronati* served for communication between healer and non-humans. This instrument is not used anymore.

In Shipibo terminology and understanding, there is no clear distinction between magical and non-magical songs. More precisely, any music performance involves some contingent magical power, for one should not sing carelessly. Illius (1997: 216) explains that Shipibo do not sing during everyday activities (there are no working songs, for example) lest they would involuntarily attract the attention of non-humans. Music is considered the spirits' language and therefore *a priori* magically potent. Songs performed at drinking parties or for courtship, for instance, also carry a certain degree of magical power: a man, for example, may sing in order to have his desired girl fall in love with him. A woman may sing to address her secret lover's potential understanding that she would like to flee with him to another village. As illustrated by these examples, numerous songs – however “secular” they may be – are thought to cast effects upon persons sung to. This understanding of effect is coded in metaphoric language. In song lyrics, for example, people are referred to as certain animals. This ascription of animal identities to human persons is not descriptive but prescriptive: the male singer who tries to seduce a girl would, for example, name her *bontoish*. The *bontoish* is a beautiful small bird, and in the code of Shipibo song lyrics it is used to address a young, good-looking and marriageable person (whose sex is usually the opposite of the singer's sex). Mentioning *bontoish* in this context does not describe the girl's behaviour but actually prescribes it: the singer defines her ideal reaction for the near future through meaningful naming.⁶

Furthermore, there are “semi-medical” songs, intended for “curing” somebody to become a good hunter or a better artist, or for “curing” people (who are e.g. lazy, or too playful with partners) to behave more acceptably in social terms. The core idea of effectiveness in these songs is the same: a precise ascription of non-human identities to the targeted person. Finally, and still apart from what Westerners would understand as “medical”, there is evidence⁷ of past activities that could

6 A more extensive analysis of Shipibo song lyrics and inherent coding of behaviour will be available in Brabec de Mori (forthcoming c).

7 See the mentions of *mochai* or similar terms by Cárdenas Timoteo (1989: 125), Diaz Castañeda (1923, cited in Tournon 2002: 182) or Izaguirre (1922–1929, cited in Wistrand Robinson 1969: 483), among a few others.

also be coined as “religious”. The *mochai* ritual, which is not performed anymore, is almost unknown in anthropological studies about Shipibo history and seems to have comprised a collective worshipping of the sun, the “curing” of sun or moon in cases of eclipse, and in certain situations, the summoning of delicately powerful animal-human transient beings called the *simpibo jonibo*. The *mochai* songs were the heart of this ritual, performed by rather large groups of singers.⁸

3. Medical songs and “Ayawaska Shamanism”

In today's healing rituals, the importance of music is obvious, because songs are performed in almost any case where healing occurs. However, these songs can only be sung efficiently by specialised healers (*médicos*). These healers used to occupy an ambivalent position in Shipibo social life as they were respected as healers and at the same time feared as sorcerers (this has changed, as will be shown later). The most discrete application of medical songs is whistling (*koxonti*) in order to “charge” a carrier substance (usually a cigar, a pipe, a perfume, or any remedy to be administered to a patient) with a song's power. Therefore, the *médico* holds the object or substance close to his⁹ mouth while he whistles the melody. The *médico* does not pronounce the song's lyrics but he must *think* the proper verses (cf. Olsen 1996: 259f. on the Warao *hoa* songs). Afterwards, the “charged” object or substance is smoked, applied, or ingested, and with that, the magical song's power should unfold and cause the intended effects. This “charging”, *koxonti*, is most often used during daytime and without many ritual preparations. It can, however, also be

8 I have recorded eleven *mochai* songs and described three categories, or purposes, of *mochai* singing: (i) adoration to the rising sun, or “healing” sun or moon during eclipse; (ii) a religious ceremony of collective prayer which is not primarily directed to the sun, but rather to meeting with 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. See Brabec de Mori (forthcoming c).

9 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.

effected through loud singing (including pronounced lyrics) towards the object, but such “publicly” pronounced magical songs are almost exclusively performed during night-time and within the context of *ayawaska* rituals.

Besides “charging” an object or substance, directed singing towards a patient (or victim) is another option, most often performed during *ayawaska* sessions. The nightly ritual commences with the healer (*médico*) ingesting the drug. Thereafter, he waits until the drug takes effect and then starts singing. In Shipibo contexts, usually songs from three categories are used, defined by their musical form: *bewá* (derived from artistic songs with a specific descending melodic model in two sections), *mashá* (derived from round-dance music sung at drinking parties, with a strict repetition section and a consequent four-beat rhythm) and *ikaro* (imported from Kichwa-, Kukama- and Spanish-speaking settlers, together with the use of *ayawaska*, with different melodic and rhythmic features; *ikaro* songs are exclusively performed in *ayawaska* sessions). The musical form can vary with each new song; which form is chosen, depends on the individual singer. Some *médicos* may sing more *ikaro*-type songs, others may sing mainly *bewá*, for example. In any case, a *médico* will directly sing to the patients and listeners (who did not ingest the drug), sometimes for up to six hours in succession, until all the healing is done, or until the drug’s effects (*pae*) fade out. If more than one *médico* is present, they may sing their songs one after another, or in unison, or they may sing simultaneously in polyphony.

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 *médico(s)* ingest *ayawaska*, but also the participants, or patients. In such cases, the healer usually leads the voice in the same way as described above, but sometimes participants may start humming, whistling or trying to follow the healer’s song in unison. Sometimes “advanced students” may sing along or perform their own songs simultaneously to the healer’s song – thus, the *ayawaska*-drinking Westerners take over the position of another *médico* present in the ritual. Most importantly, as all participants suffer the effects

of *ayawaska*, the music is considered an auditory Ariadne’s thread for guiding the visionary experience rather than a tool for actually communicating with non-humans. The common term used in literature to refer to similar structures of healing rituals is “Ayawaska shamanism”.

In all three cases, a *médico* whistles or sings determined musical sequences chosen in order to obtain certain results or effects. There is no obvious or linear relationship between musical form (*bewá*, *mashá*, or *ikaro*), melodic line, rhythm or dynamics and the *médico*’s intention, (e.g. summoning allies, calling upon divine forces, scaring away negative influences, cleaning diseased parts of the body, or fighting enemy healers or sorcerers). Instead, every healer has learned a certain repertoire of melodies. These melodies, or tunes, can be taken from songs outside the curing context. They can likewise be learned or adopted from a teacher (usually a family member: father, grandfather or uncle), or, finally, they may be made up by the *médico* himself. Consequently, every single *médico* uses a different repertoire of melodies. The singing style differs also from one individual to the other. Some sing in very high-pitched registers, for example, some prefer intense nasalisation, some sing fairly fast tempi, and so on, while others do not. Despite this apparent freedom, some generalisations in singing style can be undertaken: high-pitched falsetto singing, for example, indicates that the singer is in contact with powerful divine beings that are thought to perform in very high pitches themselves, and is therefore especially appreciated by patients. Some singers apply voice masking (cf. Olsen 1996: 159ff.) depending on the entities they are in contact with, falsetto singing being but one of the available masks. In such cases, a non-human entity seems to lend its voice to the singer. Despite the masking, we – the audience – can exclusively perceive the “translated song” produced by the singer, because he still uses a human (Shipibo style) melody and rhythm and in most cases pronounces human (Shipibo) language in his lyrics. In both, the *thought* lyrics in *koxonti* performance for “charging” objects and the *pronounced* lyrics when directly addressing patients, the main feature is still the naming of corresponding non-human identities or qualities

that are ascribed to the patient. For a proper, effective performance, a direct connection and active communication between *médico* and non-human entities is necessary. This is indicated by the masked voice, with the singer imitating the singing style of the corresponding non-humans. Only the *médico* can perceive their singing (cf. Brabec de Mori 2007). The song as performed by the *médico* appears as a “bodily-exterior manifestation of [...] knowledge and power” (Gow 2001: 144).

4. The emergence of the “Aesthetic Therapy”

The song categories and performance modalities described above – “secular”, “semi-medical” and “medical” – represent precise art and certain craftsmanship. The singers have to memorise melodies and common text phrases from their teachers or other singers in their community. In order to sing for curing, they also have to accomplish long retreats and fasting, thus apprehending how to contact non-human beings. When they conclude their year-long training period, they should be able to contact these non-humans at will and sing along with them in order to cure (or to inflict suffering).

In academic literature, however, Shipibo songs have not yet been analysed in broad comparative studies, but have often been presented in fragments and sometimes out of contexts. Translations have frequently been undertaken in spite of their translators lacking the necessary, profound understanding of metaphors and codes.¹⁰ In many cases, such analysis has been integrated in an alleged “Shipibo cosmology” (as if this existed in the singular). In the following, I am going to show how differently the function of music has been interpreted by other scholars, in order to underline how powerfully the respective researcher’s understanding of history intervenes with the interpretation of actual practice – and consequently, how it can create practice.

10 I want to exclude here the work by Illius (1987, 1997, 1999), which stands out positively. Illius has translated and analysed not only a broad collection of “shamanic” songs, but also a dialogue about singing and a series of songs not related to curing (see Illius 1999: 208ff.).

To begin with, the visual *kené* patterns have caught many visitors’ eyes more than the songs, perhaps due to the predominance of visual perception in Western life. Various scholars have tried to interpret, compare and understand the meaning of the elaborate designs which Shipibo women produce on ceramics or textiles, and which men used to carve onto wooden items. Early ethnologists applied *Kulturkreislehre*, inherited from the 19th century, or an understanding of trans-cultural diffusion in general. Tessmann (1928) disrespectfully points out that the Shipibo would only imitate an artistic style invented before by “higher civilisations”, and would therefore not understand anything of their own artwork’s meaning. During the 20th century, the designs were constantly subject to interpretations, and seldom was it seriously considered that they could actually be “only” *l’art pour l’art* – so-called *Naturvölker* were not supposed to produce art without function. Angelika Gebhart-Sayer (1986) also clings to the idea that an assumed original meaning had long been lost, and only a few “shamans” (*Schamanen*) would still know how to interpret these ancient codes. Based on these fictitious codes, she tries to find a connection between these designs, the intake of *ayawaska*, and the performance of curing songs; her hypothesis becomes clear from the title: “una terapia estética”.

With this “aesthetic therapy”, Gebhart-Sayer assumes that “shamans” could perform certain songs dedicated to obtaining certain visions of *kené* designs during their *ayawaska* experience. Vice versa, when looking at painted or embroidered designs, they could sing corresponding melodies, reproducing the hidden code from the design patterns. These “singable designs” or “song patterns” would, as Gebhart-Sayer argues, play an important role in healing sessions: in his vision, the healer would perceive the patient’s body covered by (otherwise invisible) “body patterns” *yora kené*. An ill person’s “body patterns” would appear distorted. The healer would then sing the proper song in order to summon the corresponding patterns that would subsequently appear on the patient’s body. This would result in healing.

Surprisingly, this hypothesis, which was found to be a speculative European idea and therefore lacks any evidence in past or recent

practice among Shipibo people (Brabec de Mori & Mori Silvano de Brabec 2009a, 2009b), could later be observed as a practice in the field and entered into ethnographic reports, e.g. by Martin (2005) or Rittner (2007). These authors present healers who actually *do* cover their patients with embroidered textiles before singing corresponding “pattern songs” while they are under the influence of *ayawaska*. In their reports, “shamans” drink *ayawaska* 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 Shipibo village of San Francisco de Yarinacocha near the regional capital of Pucallpa, where most tourists and inexperienced researchers reach out to meet Shipibo people for the first time.

The main differences of this musical healing technique to what I exposed beforehand are the predominance of the visual with the *kené* designs, the indubitably higher importance of *ayawaska* intake (including patients), and the disappearance of animal or other non-human identities ascribed to human addressees. By the way, as Gebhart-Sayer (1987: 275) argues, lyrics seem to be rather irrelevant for her “pattern songs”. In order to understand how such strikingly different interpretations may have emerged, I will now sum up some relevant processes of change in the Shipibo’s representations of their own lived world during the last few decades.

5. The invention of tradition

Around 1950, the Shipibo did not by any means try to represent anything especially “indigenous” in their daily lives. On the contrary, they usually sought a way of living in the best position available between their own customs and the growingly dominant fluvial *mestizo* (or *peruano*) society.¹¹

Since then, however, some changes in national and international

11 López Caballero (2008) analyses a similar process among a Mexican indigenous population. During the Mexican Revolution, the author argues, this group did not present any “Indian” identity, and their interpretation of their own past was then almost contrary to their historical narrative as told after the *indigenismo* movement.

relations have led to a re-indigenisation of most Peruvian rainforest groups, the chief causes being: (i) the missionary-linguistic labours of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL, active in Yarinacocha near Pucallpa between 1947 and 2002) with its conservative ideology, active among most indigenous groups; (ii) the land reform of the Sistema Nacional de Movilización Social (SINAMOS) project under the left-wing government of General Velasco in the early 1970s, granting communal land titles exclusively to native villages (*comunidades nativas*); (iii) the growing interest of anthropologists in native Amazonians, and therefore a confrontation with questions then new to the people, regarding “traditions”, “myths”, or “knowledge of the elders”; and finally, (iv) since the 1960s, but massively since about 1990, a steadily growing invasion of “individual tourists”, “eco-tourists”, “spiritual seekers”, “ethnomedical tourists” and “whiteshamans” (Rose 1992) that spread over Shipibo territory, though being concentrated in San Francisco de Yarinacocha.

The immense interest especially in the Shipibo from both anthropologists and tourists can be explained by combining the following parameters: relatively easy geographic accessibility, the “traditional” use of a hallucinogenic drug, and elaborate native artwork (the *kené* patterns), aesthetically appealing also to uneducated Westerners. Regarding *ayawaska*, a crucial event for fostering this interest was the publication of the popular book *The Yage Letters* by Burroughs & Ginsberg in 1963. Moreover, famous books by Castaneda (1968) and Harner (1972, 1973) drew many experience-seekers towards “indigenous drugs”, into the Peruvian rainforests and therefore to the Shipibo people.¹²

All these tendencies helped to shift the indigenous people’s social position in positive ways compared to the fluvial *mestizo* population, who were almost entirely ignored. This favourable position was, however, only available for people and villages who declared themselves “indigenous” and showed this, by representing their “nativity” in vernacular language use (for the SIL), in communal

12 For further details about this process, see Brabec de Mori & Mori Silvano de Brabec (2009b), and Brabec de Mori (forthcoming b).

labour economies (for obtaining SINAMOS' land titles), in being very knowledgeable about indigenous items (for anthropologists), and in practising preferably "mystic" or "spiritual", even "primitive", at any rate spectacular and impressing events for the tourists – in short: the more "indigenous", the better.

In a series of publications,¹³ my wife and I have contributed to empirically showing which elements of today's "Shipibo culture" (which is a singular) may be traced in the past and in histories of various sub-groups of fluvial Pano (which is a plural) in the Ucayali valley, and which elements can be understood as individual creations (which is a plural) that are nowadays presented as "the original tradition of the Shipibo" (which is a singular). It appears that there are many items changing, being lost, and being created, although meanwhile, an illusion of "the original tradition of the Shipibo" is maintained by natives, missionaries, NGOs, 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 similar renderings. Such terminology is excessively used by the indigenous people themselves. Especially in San Francisco de Yarinacocha, a sort of unofficial "school" has emerged, where people make money with the visitors: they are (male) "*chamanes*", (female) "*artesan*", (male) "*artistas*", (male or female) "*músicos/músicas*" or, in the most promising cases, a combination of all.¹⁴

13 See Brabec de Mori & Mori Silvano de Brabec (2009a, 2009b), and Brabec de Mori (forthcoming b).

14 The Shipibo *ayawaska*-using specialists were mostly male, 93% in my survey. Only in recent years, some "gender mainstreaming" has been taking place (probably triggered by tourists' preferences), and female *ayahuasqueras* are emerging (cf. Jervis, forthcoming; see also <<http://www.templeofthewayoflight.org>> (20/11/2010)). All *ayawaska*-using specialists working in an indigenous context identify themselves as *médicos* (using this Spanish loan-word instead of vernacular terms like *yobé* or *meraya*). If, on the other hand, they call themselves *chamanes*, this is a fairly secure indicator that they aim towards working with Western visitors. Further on, the distinction between *artesan* and *artistas* is very interesting (cf. Brabec de Mori & Mori Silvano de Brabec 2009a): female *artesan* produce "handicraft", a medium-size embroidered sheet sold at around USD 35, while male *artistas* produce "art" paintings sold at around USD 350 each (prices from 2008), although average investments in labour, material and creativity turn out to be fairly similar. This

Items in process of change include but are not exhausted by the following list:

(i) Medical or magical songs outside the *ayawaska* complex, like those including theatrical performances and possession by animals, were altogether dismissed among Shipibo; drinking and courtship songs are nowadays exclusively performed at presentations for paying tourists.

(ii) The *ayawaska* ritual complex was quickly adapted: what was once marginal and feared by natives who were not *médicos* themselves got most interest from visitors (and therefore gifts and money), and so this ritual was re-located in the very centre of "Shipibo culture". Not only the *médico(s)* would drink the brew, but all present, including visitors. Collective hallucinatory experience was declared to be the "traditional" way for Shipibo to apply indigenous medicine.

(iii) The *kené* designs were adapted to market strategies and therefore simplified in complexity and standardised (cf. Lathrap 1976, Mori Silvano de Brabec 2010, and see the illustrations at the end). Researchers' questions about possible meanings of the designs were reflected by the natives, and many Shipibo started to give creative answers to such questions (Brabec de Mori & Mori Silvano de Brabec 2009b: 112–114).

(iv) The songs performed during *ayawaska* sessions were connected to the complex of *kené* designs answering Gebhart-Sayer's questions. Herlinda Agustín in San Francisco de Yarinacocha worked with Gebhart-Sayer and is now the most prominent protagonist for "healing patterns", "song patterns", and even "woven songs" (Martin 2005).

(v) This combined multimedia package was thus declared a millennial tradition and explained as "the ancient tradition of the Shipibo" (which is a singular, again): in other words, the (adapted) *ayawaska* drinking session, the (aesthetically renewed) *kené* art, and the (never existing) songs which would evoke designs, or designs which would encode songs, are said to have ever been there.

distinction between "art" and "handicraft" is a recent Western import (before around 1995, art painters were absent among Shipibo) and sheds a doubtful shade on assumed gender equality in Western society.

6. The structuring of time

In most indigenous Amazonian societies, “tradition”, “originality”, “authenticity”, “history”, and similar terms cannot be expressed in the vernacular language. There are many indications that the structuring of time in indigenous Amazonian languages does not necessarily follow a linear or even a circular idea of a *progressing* time. Gow (2001), for example, dedicated a whole book to explaining how the Yine people use narrative structures (“myths”) for obliterating time (in a Lévi-Straussian sense) and for constructing flexible histories. Among the Yine as well as among the Shipibo, a “mythical” narration is defined by the use of certain discursive and grammatical forms (see Illius 1999: 126–164), altogether related to aspects of remoteness or evidentiality (Valenzuela 2003: 37–42). In Shipibo, a tense for indicating “mythical” or “remote” past has been claimed to be found in the case of verbs with the marker *-ni*. In the following examples, the action had obviously occurred a long, “remote” time before the speech.

- (1) *Moa-tian-ra* *nocon* *papa-shoco* *nii* *meran* *ca-ni-que*
 already-when-DIR.ev my father-DIM forest inside go-ni-CMPL

‘Long ago, my grandfather went into the forest’
 (from Faust 1990 [1973]: 45 [“Mucho antes, mi abuelo se ha ido al monte”], my glosses)

In example (2), we face a case of “mythical” past where *-ni* is used together with narrative markers (here: *nete benatianronki*).

- (2) *Nete* *ben-tian-ronki* *no-n* *reken-bo* *onitsapi-bires*
 world new-TEMP-REP 1 PL-GEN first-PL:ABS suffer:sssi-purely

ja-pao-ni-ke [...] *live-HAB-REM.P-CMPL*

‘When the world was new, our ancestors lived just suffering [...]’
 (from Valenzuela 2003: 38, original glosses)

In Shipibo, however, the so-called “remote” or “mythical” past can be described more accurately as a remote (or extra-experiential) non-future. That is, it covers not only events reported as having taken place long before the actual time of speech but extends also to events or states that are contemporaneous with the time of speech while taking place or obtaining at a level beyond ordinary everyday perception. Consider the following example (3) from a curing song, where *tsaka-ni* ‘pierced’ does not refer to an event of a remote, mythical past but to one having taken place only shortly before the time of speech:

- (3) *min* *xama* *tsaka-ni* / *tsaka-ni*
 your essence/culmination pierce-REM.NONFUT pierce-REM.NONFUT

i-ken-bi / *pisha-aketan-a*
 do/be-after-EMPH loosen-all.around-CMPL.PART

‘because your essence was pierced (I have) loosened it at all sides’¹⁵

In this example *xama* refers to an aspect of the patient’s body that is not directly perceivable. This aspect of the body is now in a vulnerable state because it was recently “pierced” by sorcery. That is, the use of *-ni* here does not indicate remoteness in time but rather remoteness from everyday experience.

In example (4) (also from a curing song), finally, *bo-ni-bo-kan* ‘takes away’ again refers to an event that is not accessible to ordinary everyday perception. That event, however, is not at all located in the past but taking place at the time of speech:

- (4) *roni(n)-man* *kaya* *bo-ni-bo-kan* / *jawen*
 anaconda-TRA soul take.away-REM.NONFUT-EMPH-MOD his/her

kaya-kaya-ki / *kena-kena-bain-kin*
 soul-EMPH-REP call-call-MOD-help

‘(while) the anaconda takes away his/her soul, (they are helping me) call it’

15 Examples (3) and (4) are taken from my field data held by the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (V 2126, access restricted, and D 5498).

According to Mori Silvano de Brabec (pers. comm., November 2010), the use of *-ni* as an indicator for contemporaneous remoteness is limited to speeches or songs of *médicos* during ritual performance.¹⁶ That *-ni* partakes in the expression of extra-experiential states or events was already recognised by Illius (1999: 128):

Und vielleicht ist das Suffix *-paonique*, das die Zeitstufe der meisten Mythen kennzeichnet, nicht nur die fernste Vergangenheit, sondern gleichzeitig ein zeitloses, allgegenwärtiges Präsens; gleichzusetzen etwa mit einem Verwandlungszustand, einer „möglichen“ Existenzform. Man könnte sehr wohl versuchen, die bisher als „Zeitstufen“ verstandenen und bezeichneten Verbformen auf *-qui*, *-ni*, *-nique* und vor allem *-paonique* nicht mehr als Tempus oder Tempus-Aspekt aufzufassen [...], sondern als eine „Realitätsstufe“ [...].

It follows that the grammatical forms involving *-ni* do not necessarily indicate past. In any case, the extra-experiential aspect which applies to both “mythical” and “magical” speech (narration or song) leads to the conclusion that both are not *fixed*. It appears that the use of remote non-future in Shipibo language allows for the possibilities of duplication, transformation, and bifurcation, in short, for altering the respective contents depending on the speaker’s subject position. Considering these thoughts, Shipibo discourse about the past (“tradition”, “originality”, and so on) necessarily includes the possibility of change, in the same way as the present (“this world”, “the patient’s illness”, and so on) allows for change or manipulation in the course of the *médicos*’ actions for healing or sorcery.

7. Conclusions

In the first part of this paper I undertook a survey of the constructive power of song in different settings, like (“secular”) drinking songs or love songs, (“semi-medical”) songs for power or certain cultural

16 In many *médicos*’ songs *-ni* is used without the completive aspect marker *-kel-que* (see examples (3) and (4)). In everyday discourse, however, both suffixes are almost always used in combination (see examples (1) and (2)). In cases of verbs ending in *-ni* (ex. (3)), the occurrence of the remote non-future (exclusively in *médicos*’ speech) has to be carefully distinguished by context from the ending *-n-i* (occurring also in everyday discourse), which is a succession of the translator suffix *-n* and the modifier suffix *-i* indicating intention (‘in order to’).

effects, and medical or magical songs performed with or without the intake of *ayawaska*. This was compared to a more popular interpretation of Shipibo musical healing, the “aesthetic therapy” that involves the *kené* designs. Then I analysed how a “tribal” identity and a collective “tradition” could emerge during the 20th century among the Shipibo. Finally, the function of the suffix *-ni* in Shipibo language was investigated. The results show that past and present are not as clearly distinguished as e.g. in European languages. Both the song as a magical process based on resources which are located in an extra-experiential present (like a parallel world or “stratum of reality”) and the narrative as a constructive process based on resources located in the past are capable of manipulating a subject’s position (e.g. social or economic) and condition (e.g. psychological or physical) during the present situation and consequently for the future.

The idea of a flexible past that allows for different and changing histories is perfectly suitable to a structuring of time that does not *a priori* separate past from present. A past that is present (although in any case extra-experiential) does not contradict everyday experiences of e.g. people (or the world as such) growing old(er), but simply incorporates a past that is as *un-fixed* as the future into the concept of time. The immanent presence of past as well as future is therefore not felt directly, but located in distant though real regions. Within these remote “strata of reality”, time and space – past, present, future, here, and there – are not separate. This is well known in many descriptions of “shamanic” cosmologies.¹⁷ These remote regions can only be visited and accessed by trained specialists (the *médicos*), and any manipulation of those regions and the resulting transformations or effects on everyday life can only be performed by singing or by formalised telling of narratives.

On the other hand, the historical inevitability of the common Western interpretation of time is not compatible with this model of *un-fixed* past. Therefore, a conflict emerges when interpreting processes

17 See for example the vast (though methodologically outdated) collection of descriptions of shamans travelling to remote places and remote times in the pioneer comparative study by Eliade (1997 [1951]).

of historical change within an indigenous group. This conflict was profoundly analysed by Gow (2001: 14–19, and elsewhere). An “orthodox” Western understanding of most processes of change makes the indigenous people appear very passive, likewise reacting to the intrusive force of the globalising world. However, a deeper understanding of the indigenous structuring of time reveals that their role is much more active. In some situations, as has been shown in this paper, they are far ahead instead, with Westerners struggling to react to their innovations, like anthropologists (including me) perpetually investigating and asking them stupid questions in order to finally find out about their “real” past – while many Shipibo make great fun of us.¹⁸

The Shipibo protagonists who nowadays perform songs that can be transformed into designs and vice versa are of course inventing this from scrap (or more precisely, anthropologist Gebhart-Sayer invented it). However, in view of their current practice and their attributing a new meaning to the flexible dimension of “remote past” by declaring that thus was “the original tradition of the Shipibo”, this idea is actually transforming into reality. Visitors can nowadays observe this practice, although still almost exclusively in San Francisco de Yarinacocha. However, I suppose the practice will spread further among Shipibo in the near future, simply because it sells fairly well. The structuring of time and distance in Shipibo understanding allows for complete freedom in maintaining, transmitting, creating and changing of “tradition”, in the same way as a present situation can be manipulated magically by specialist *médicos* through proper singing. History is in the making.

18 See the conclusion and appendix sections in Brabec de Mori (forthcoming b), where some funny and at the same time embarrassing examples for “hidden dialogues” among Shipibo vendors and artists are given.

Abbreviations

IPL	FIRST PERSON PLURAL
ABS	ABSOLUTIVE
CMPL	COMPLETIVE ASPECT
DIM	DIMINUTIVE
DIR.EV	DIRECT EVIDENTIAL
EMPH	EMPHASIS
GEN	GENITIVE
HAB	HABITUAL
MOD	MODIFICATOR
PART	PARTICIPLE
PL	PLURAL
REM.NONFUT	REMOTE NON-FUTURE
REM.P	REMOTE PAST
REP	REPORTED
SSSI	SIMULTANEOUS EVENT, SAME SUBJECT, INTRANSITIVE MATRIX CLAUSE
TEMP	TEMPORAL ADVERB
TRA	TRANSLATOR, INTRANSITIVE TO TRANSITIVE

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Fig. 1: The médico Armando Sánchez Valles, during an ayawaska session. Original slide photograph taken by Bernd Brabec de Mori (11/3/2001) in San Salvador (distr. Yarinacocha, prov. Coronel Portillo, dept. Ucayali, Peru).

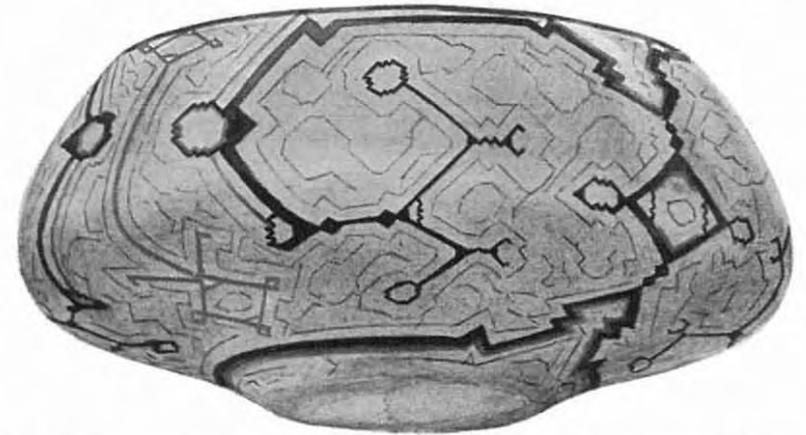


Fig. 2: Ceramic drinking vessel (kempo) painted with kené, from around 1925. Watercolour painting from Tessmann (1928: 136f., Tafel IV (detail)).



Fig. 3: Painted kempo from around 2000, made for sale at the tourist market, bearing today's "standard" kené; note the decrease in complexity compared to the vessel from 1925. Original digital photograph by Pierre Urban, 2001 (authorised).



Fig. 4: Schoolgirls representing indigenous culture; note the “normal” outfit of the children in the back. Original digital photograph taken by Bernd Brabec de Mori (3/12/2004) in Túpac Amaru (distr. Tahuania, prov. Atalaya, dept. Ucayali, Peru).

Fig. 5: Shipibo candidate at the “Miss Indígena” contest. This “hyper-indigenisation” seems to be influenced by Brazilian popular culture.

Original digital photograph taken by Bernd Brabec de Mori (21/6/2004) in Puerto Callao (distr. Yarinacocha, prov. Coronel Portillo, dept. Ucayali, Peru).

