About magical singing, sonic perspectives, ambient multinatures, and the conscious experience

Abstract: The significance of the sonic, especially of vocal music, in the context of animism and perspectivism was hitherto underestimated in anthropological theory. Working on examples of Shipibo-Konibo magical songs from the author’s own ethnomusicological fieldwork recordings, in this paper it is proposed that the first-person experience of médicos (healers or sorcerers) has to be considered most valuable for interpreting structures of relationships between humans and non-humans. This experience surfaces most obviously in singing styles and lyrics of songs performed by médicos in the current state of interaction with non-humans during ritual curing, worshipping, or fighting. Results obtained from this analysis include: 1) The ascription of consciousness and human or humanoid physicality to non-humans is the result of the médico’s perceptions during musically induced or controlled altered states of perception and cognition (ASPC); 2) The transformation into and identification with non-humans involve full conscious experience by the médico and therefore pertain to the highest level of evidentiality in Shipibo discourse which is ontologically determining; 3) Human physicality and competence of perception and action is not universal among all beings but is a matter of grading dependent on magical and practical powers of the respective species; 4) A “sonic perspectivism” allowing for agency in the construction of perspectives, and an “ambient multinaturalism” extending the notion of transformation from body to environment, are introduced by analysing sonic phenomena. Finally, the author proposes to focus more on indigenous praxis than on analysis and comparison of narratives in order to understand indigenous ontologies.

Keywords: Shipibo-Konibo, vocal music, animism, perspectivism, Peru, 21st century.
Resumen: Hasta ahora la importancia de lo sónico, especialmente la música vocal, en el contexto del animismo y el perspectivismo ha sido subestimada en la teoría antropológica. Basándose en ejemplos de canciones mágicas de los shipibokonibo extraídas de grabaciones etnomusicológicas propias del trabajo del campo del autor, se propone en este artículo que la experiencia en primera persona de médicos (curanderos o brujos) debe ser considerada de altísimo valor para la interpretación de las estructuras de relaciones entre humanos y no humanos. Esta experiencia surge de manera más evidente en los estilos de canto y las letras de las canciones interpretadas por los médicos en el estado de interacción con los no humanos durante la curación, la adoración o la lucha rituales. Los resultados obtenidos de este análisis incluyen: 1) La adscripción de la conciencia y la materialidad humana o humanoide a los no humanos es resultado de las percepciones del médico durante estados alterados de percepción y cognición controlados o inducidos musicalmente; 2) La transformación en los no humanos y la identificación con los mismos suponen una experiencia de plena conciencia por parte del médico y así pertenecen al más alto nivel de la evidencialidad en el discurso shipibo que es ontológicamente determinante; 3) La materialidad y la competencia de percepción y acción humanas no son universales entre todos los seres sino son el resultado de una clasificación en función de los poderes mágicos y prácticos de las respectivas especies; y 4) A través del análisis de fenómenos sónicos se introducen un “perspectivismo sónico” que permite agencia en la construcción de perspectivas y un “multinaturalismo ambiental” que extiende la noción de transformación del cuerpo al ambiente. Por último, el autor propone centrarse más en la práctica indígena que en el análisis y la comparación de narrativas para entender las ontologías indígenas.

Palabras clave: Shipibo-konibo, música vocal, animismo, perspectivismo, Perú, siglo xxi.
In a city, a young Asháninka man has to wait for about a week for his ferry and therefore rents a cheap room. After a few days he appears at the local police department: “I would like to report my mestizo neighbour for repeatedly beating his wife. Every night I hear him shouting and her screaming –” The policeman interrupts: “Did you see that?” “No, but I can hear –” The policeman interrupts again and declares: “If you haven’t seen it, you can’t report it. Goodbye.” The young man rises from his chair and makes for the door. Before leaving the office, he farts incredibly loud. The policeman starts up and shouts, “Can’t you behave? How comes that you fart in here like this?” – The Asháninka responds: “Did you see that?”

A Shipibo joke

1. Introduction

The sonic, specifically vocal music by the western Amazonian indigenous group Shipibo-Konibo, and its function within the indigenous cosmos will be discussed in this paper. The interactions of music performance with the social and individual human condition including human consciousness may reveal some aspects and qualities of an animistic ontology which hitherto received little attention by anthropologists. In order to discuss animism, or perspectivism, as understood in contemporary anthropological studies among indigenous societies in the South American lowlands, one will not be able to skip the ontological approach as coined by Philippe Descola (2005) who established four categories of ontologies (animism, totemism, analogyism, and naturalism). It appears that the main divide can be drawn between naturalism and the others, because of the strict distinction between culture as the domain

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1 The fieldwork referred to in this paper was made possible by grants awarded by the University of Vienna and the Austrian Academy of Sciences (program ‘DOC’). The presented translations of Shipibo songs were done by my wife Laida Mori Silvano de Brabec. I thank Matthias Lewy, Rafael José de Menezes Bastos, Anthony Seeger, Dale A. Olsen, and Victor A. Stoichiţă for their valuable comments, suggestions and discussions. I am grateful to Bruno Illius, specifically for his suggestion to include the phenomenon of mimesis in my argument. Most special thanks go to Ernst Halbmayer who invited me to participate in “Debating Animism” and subsequently in this publication and who most critically read and commented on drafts of this paper. Pascual Mahua Ochavano explained in many details how he and his peer médicos work and experience the world. Finally, this paper would not have been possible without the confidence and knowledge of Herminia Sanancino Mozombite, José Alvarado Marrona, Claudio Sánchez Serafin, and one anonymised médico who are the authors of the presented example texts.
of human action and nature as an independent variable of non-human environment established in naturalism, which is absent in the other three categories. The concepts of perspectivism and multituralism formulated by Viveiros de Castro (1997) and others (e.g. Stoltze Lima 1999, Vilaçá 2005), on the other hand, rely on a radical reversion of naturalism in Amerindian perspectivistic cosmologies. Therefore, these concepts still cannot (and do not intend to) completely overcome the culture-nature-divide, as was shown in a brilliant intellectual exercise by Turner (2009). Although there is a long debate at work among the protagonists of these theories,

What is clear is that this debate destroys the notion of nature as an overarching concept covering the globe, to which anthropologists have the rather sad and limited duty of adding whatever is left of differences under the tired old notion of ‘culture’ [...]

– say, a radical relativisation of naturalism as the dominant concept.

Against this backdrop of contemporary theoretical debate – which has still to gain sharpness, or, as Viveiros de Castro puts it, ‘anthropology today is largely decolonized, but its theory is not yet decolonizing enough’ (Latour 2009: 2) – I will explore the relevance of animism and perspectivism in music performances of trained specialists (commonly called ‘shamans’; in this paper I will refer to them as médicos, a common term in local discourse). This exploration relies on musical ethnography I collected with the pano-speaking Shipibo-Konibo people (henceforth Shipibo) among whom I conducted fieldwork during five years of the past decade. With around 45,000 people, the Shipibo are a rather large indigenous group. They dwell mainly on the shores of the Ucayali River and tributaries in the eastern Peruvian rainforests. In their vernacular language they autodenominate themselves noa jonikon, “We Real People” or non kaibo, “Our Relatives”.

The definition of who may be considered a “Real Person” and who may be “only a person” (but not a “Real” one) is not only intrinsically connected to the question who may be considered to “have culture” (where both Descola and Viveiros de Castro agree that human culture is attributed to all persons in an animic as well as an perspectivistic society). It proves even more important who may “have human consciousness” – which beings would perceive themselves “sub specie humanitatis” (Viveiros de Castro 1997: 106), that is, which beings would believe that they were human beings themselves; and, finally, if this perception is (as Viveiros de Castro argues) consistent among both “people” and “Real People”. It has not yet been explored to great extent that the notion of who may be regarded a conscious person depends on (human) perception, and vice versa. Challenging “orthodox” perspectivism, Rosengren (2006) describes that Matsigenka cosmic positioning seems to depend on the positionality of the conscious self rather than on the physical form.
Likewise, Santos-Granero proposes that obtaining knowledge among the Yaneshas combines the “five common senses” of the body with senses of what he translates as “vitalities”:

[...] whereas the bodily senses only perceive the tunic of things, that is, their material appearance, the noncorporeal senses of our vitalities are capable of perceiving things as ‘they really are’ (Santos-Granero 2006: 61).

Consciousness seems not to be located in the physical body but rather in an instance (vitality) capable of obtaining at least two existential modes: staying localised within a human body in everyday situations, and perceiving and acting on its own during specific occasions. Descola’s types of ontologies – at least in theory – can live without different perception modalities, but Viveiros de Castro’s approach necessarily includes radically different perceptions of what he calls “multi-natures” by different persons from different species. I do acknowledge Viveiros de Castro’s interpretation that perception of the environment was similar among different species, but rather the “natures” of their bodies were different. Within “multinaturalism”, Viveiros de Castro understands both humans’ and non-humans’ bodies as flexible “bundles of affects”, resulting in a “somatic perspectivism” (1997: 107-108). However, in this paper I do neither intend to speculate about e.g. a jaguar’s perceptions of its body and its surroundings, nor whether these perceptions were different from human perceptions. I rather wish to show how perceptions by Real People who experience what it is like to being e.g. a jaguar differ from perceptions obtained during their everyday states. Such specific perceptions are subsequently attributed to the corresponding non-humans by the médicos who experienced such states. Shipibo ethnographic and linguistic examples affirm these different modes of perceptions from different perspectives, although not in the absolute, egalitarian sense of “orthodox” perspectivism.

The question here is not whether human perception, cognition and consciousness can be regarded universal (as naturalistic science claims), but how different modes or states of perception are used in order to achieve knowledge of perspectives, or “multi-natures” as is thought to be experienced by non-human persons. Human perception may be universal (or not) in so-called “healthy wake states”. In Amerindian and many other ontologies, perceptions obtained during altered states of consciousness (ASC, or more precisely, altered states of perception and cognition, ASPC) have to be regarded much more interesting for inter-specific explorations. These explorations are usually undertaken by specialists. In the Western Amazon, these specialist médicos have to train for a long time in order to master entering, controlling and exiting provoked meaningful dreams, or ASPC induced by fasting, specific
musical practice or dancing, or by the ingestion of psychoactive preparations,\(^2\) say, to master almost everything else than “healthy wake states”. The importance of dream experience and of techniques of controlling them is underlined by Santos-Granero by stating that dream

[...] is closely associated with particular ontological and cosmological conceptions that oppose the ‘virtual reality’ of the material world and the physical body to the ‘real reality’ of the multiplicity of intangible worlds and spiritual body essences (2003: 180).

Within an emic context, descriptions provided by médicos who claim to perceive this “real reality” or “multi-natures” in the way non-human agents who are “natives” in these realms are supposed to do, finally allow to interpret the perspectives or ontological positioning of these non-humans relative to “us”, to human (Shipibo) commoners, the specialist médico’s audience. The specialists therefore experience and perform the non-humans’ perceptions and actions and may or may not attribute “humanness” – that is human consciousness – to the non-humans in question. In general, non-humans who are addressed with jonibo (persons) carry this attribute of human consciousness. We can see that personhood is related to (human) consciousness, which is related to (altered) perception, which is likewise linked to perspective, which is again related to personhood. If approaching these relations assuming the “healthy wake state” as the determining principle of “truth” (intra-ontological validity), the most reasonable conclusion can be given in the way Turner (2009) or Karadimas (this volume) do: relativising, or “softening” perspectivism and animism to anthropomorphism as an “anthropological invariant”\(^3\). This works perfectly as long as one does not consider the reports from outside the realm of “healthy wake states” obtained by Amerindian specialists while exploring any form of ASPC.

Finally, I would like to stress the importance of the sonic: Viveiros de Castro (in company of a legion of anthropologists) heavily relies on the visual and the culinary, that is on predator-prey relationships as well as on the visible and the

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\(^2\) Today, among Shipibo and neighbouring groups the ingestion of the hallucinogenic plant brew ayawaska is most common. However, historically this was different (cf. Gow 1994; Brabec de Mori 2011d). In this paper I therefore refer to ASPC in a general sense, independent of their etiology (including ayawaska as well as dreaming, fasting, repetitious singing, hyperventilation, etc.).

\(^3\) Both Turner and Karadimas apply a Lévy-Straussian structuralist approach, relying on analysing, comparing and theorising myths. I think that both authors overlook contemporary praxis (in ritual or everyday life). Whereas myths tell us about the past and about past encounters with and transformations into non-humans most often by accident, the médicos’ praxis tells us how such states are obtained here, now, and intentionally – a crucial difference.
commonly invisible. Despite pioneering work in ethnomusicology by Seeger (1987), Hill (1993), Olsen (1996), or Menezes Bastos (2007), among others, which is widely acknowledged also among anthropologists, the sonic and the musical are still not integrated in anthropological theory. In line with ethnomusicology, Lewy (this volume) historically and ethnographically observes among the Venezuelan Pemón that between species, “seeing” is “different”, while “hearing” is “similar”. With that he indicates that the very indigenous people may use visually oriented terminology to express difference, but acoustic, and musical communication for establishing similarity or at least mutual recognition. Illius clearly states, that for Shipibo, “Music is the spirit’s language, and singing is the adequate mode of communicating with them” (1997: 216, my translation). While Karadimas (2004, and this volume) looks at a Miraña wind instrument made of a deer skull (and other items of visual arts), I would love to listen to its sound when blown. During the last decade, I have listened and re-listened to ca. 2,800 Western Amazonian indigenous songs in recordings I made myself – which means that I was present at their live performances, either in explorative settings or during current festivities or rituals. It became clear to me that the audible, especially vocal music does indeed play a great role in Shipibo ontology and does so probably in many other societies:

It is as though music were the centripetal force enabling the convergence of the visual, olfactory and other kinds of discourse composing the rites. Following convergence of these elements, this force becomes centrifugal, recomposing the diversity of ritual discourses. In the Kamayurá case, music likewise functions as a pivotal system mediating the universes of the verbal arts (poetry and myth) with plastic-visual expressions (graphic design, iconography, feather art) and choreological expressions (dance, theatre) (Menezes Bastos 2007: 5).

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4 Viveiros de Castro writes, that “The raw and the cooked cannot be separated from the visible and the invisible. Amerindian cultures evince a strong visual bias of their own [...] Vision is often the model of perception and knowledge [...]; shamanism is laden with visual concepts” (2010: 8). This visual/chemical bias in perspectivism was criticized e.g. by Classen (2005), Rosengren (2006) and Santos-Granero (2006).

5 Rosengren writes that among Matsigenka, it is required “that verbally interacting parties must be located in the same dimension of reality in order to understand each other, since each mode of verbal communication is exclusive to a particular dimension” (2006: 89). I think that this seemingly radical opposition to Lewy appears because it refers to speaking, while Lewy refers to singing – another crucial difference.

6 Most of the songs are in Shipibo language, but Asháninka, Yine, Kukama, Iskobakebo, Kakataibo, Amahuaca, and others are present as well in this corpus which is completely archived at the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv and described in detail in Brabec de Mori (2011b, volume 2).
Going further, not only the audible, but also the “apparently inaudible” (Menezes Bastos 2011) is not only valuable, but necessarily to be recognized for understanding visual difference and other phenomena. According to Shipibo understanding, the sound rooo uttered by a howler monkey, for example, carries meaning equivalent to Shipibo love or ritual songs – if one can only listen to, understand, and translate it. It is therefore my aim to show how musical practice among Shipibo specialist méédicos can provide elaborate models of personhood, consciousness, perception, and perspective.

2. Consciousness, perception, and evidence

In naturalistic consciousness research, first-person experience cannot be measured, especially experience obtained in dreams or other ASPC proves difficult. In phenomenological or philosophical terms, consciousness can be defined as a subjective first-person experience of what it is like being someone (Nagel 1974). Lehrer, for example, argues that the experience of consciousness via the subjective experience of qualia is apt to create knowledge about the conscious state by “exemplarisation” (Lehrer 2006: 412). Therefore, subjective experience creates representation of this state by being a kind of conscious state. With that, I may argue, one who experi-

7 Cf. Windt & Noreika (2011): These authors critically review the “integration problem” of dream experience into consciousness theories, also paying some attention to disturbing topics like “lucid dreaming”, “pathological wake states”, “hallucinogen-induced experience” and even “out-of-body experience”. The all-encompassing uncertainties in these topics show that scientific research in this area is still far from providing reliable results. Although in cognitive sciences many models and approaches interpret the vast and rapidly growing data about neural correlates of consciousness and the first-person knowledge about conscious states itself, “at present, however, no single model of consciousness appears sufficient to account fully for the multidimensional properties of conscious experience” (Seth 2007: 10). These co-developing models significantly differ in terms of restricting the possibility of conscious experience to “normally functioning” human beings (in the Western understanding, of course). E.g. the information integration theory of consciousness would allow experience of consciousness for any system with high enough Φ, where Φ is a measure for dynamic complexity of information processing (cf. Seth 2007). However, it seems that “high enough Φ” depends on whether this complexity is externally attributed to a system or not, as complexity cannot be measured from outside the system (again resulting in the problem of “other minds”, see below).

8 With “exemplarisation”, Lehrer points at the quality of an “exemplar”. While an example represents a category, an exemplar is part of a category but not representative for it – my own experience of what it is like being Bernd Brabec de Mori is an exemplar for a conscious state but cannot be taken as representation (like an example) for other (or others’) conscious states because of an inherent lack of comparability in this category. Lehrer’s argument shows that representation can nevertheless be achieved, because exemplarisation itself creates representation of the very exemplarisation – a “loop”, concept this author is very fond of.
ences consciousness may imagine others to have consciousness, too, others who may be one’s closest relatives, any human being, and, consequently any non-human or even “inanimate” being. Following phenomenological models of consciousness, it seems easy to link the very experience of conscious states to attributing them to non-humans in animism. This is what anthropomorphism is about in anthropological theories. Both Nagel and Lehrer provide an option for non-human beings (e.g. the bat in Nagel 1974), to experience consciousness for themselves. However, this would rather be a bat’s consciousness than human consciousness. The latter could only be attributed to a bat via anthropomorphism (cf. Karadimas’ bat in this volume).

The phenomenological basis of consciousness, the self-generated knowledge of what it is like being, for example, myself, is not compatible with third-person observation, as long as we stay within the Western scientific paradigm, including as a “fact that the phenomenology of a subject’s experiences cannot be viewed from a third-person perspective (the classical philosophical problem of ‘other minds’)” (Velmans 2009: 146). This conceptual paradox however results from the sharp differentiation between first-person experience and third-person observation in naturalistic understanding, where only the observable (and reproducible) is considered evident. “Other minds” do not pose a problem to indigenous people in the Western Amazon. Among the Shipibo, evidence is considered greatest, when first-person experience is expressed. This is obvious, for example, in the grammar of the Shipibo language, where different levels of evidentiality can be distinguished. These are also linked to the relative remoteness (in time or space) of the event or process referred to by the speaker (Camacho & Elias-Ulloa 2005; Brabec de Mori 2011a).

The coding of evidentiality in SK [Shipibo-Konibo] takes place at two different levels. First, a major distinction between first-hand information and second-hand information is established; secondly, a further specification may occur to indicate either inference or speculation. As commonly found in languages with a grammaticalized evidentiality category, SK evidentials may also encode epistemic modality and mirativity (Valenzuela 2003: 33).

Along with other grammatical forms, Valenzuela extrapolates these different levels of evidence expressed with the morphemes -ra/ri- (first-hand information) and -ronki (“it is told that...”), second-hand information). She confirms that a “shaman” (médico) uses -ra when telling about his own experience during ASPC despite its remoteness

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9 Some cineasts may claim these days that they know what it is like “Being John Malkovich”. This example resembles the fascination of finding a way to actually experience what it is like being anybody (or anything) else, transcending the “problem of other minds”. History of arts, cinema, literature and music is full of similar examples.
from everyday accessibility. The reportative -ronki, on the other hand, may be used when the médico tells the patient what non-human allies have told him (Valenzuela 2003: 51). In the example texts presented later, the respective markers are underlined in order to show at which points the singing médicos transmit their perceptions as evidence.

Because in Shipibo médicos’ speech, especially in song, the first-person experience of dream or ASPC contents can be linked to the highest level of evidentiality (with the use of -ra), the experience of what it is like being a bat, John Malkovich, or a forest-dwelling black jaguar gains significance and may lead to a very different understanding of consciousness within indigenous thought. In order to highlight the intrinsic logic of the indigenous approach, in the following I am going to report some ethnographic accounts on how Shipibo médicos use to obtain, control, and translate such experiences into socially significant knowledge – that is, mainly through singing.

3. Knowing what it is like being an animal

Western Amazonian people, including the Shipibo, use a method called “dieting” (samatai in Shipibo language) in order to contact non-humans. A person willing to do so applies a substance on him- or herself (e.g. ingests a decoction of tree barks, or bathes in water containing certain leaves) and then retires from ordinary life for a certain period of time (ranging from one day to a few years, depending on context).\(^{10}\) In seclusion, ordinary human food as well as contact with fellow humans is avoided. During the “diet”, the “dieter” is supposed to make contact with non-humans, usually with those associated with the applied substance. During an intense “diet”, for example in order to become a healer, ASPC occur. The “dieter” may dream, have wake-state visions, hear voices (one could say, the “dieter” generally adapts to a fairly psychotic perception), and thus communicate with non-humans. The “dieter” therefore is viewed as somebody who transforms into one of the non-humans and shares time and localisation with them in order to learn from them. The complete transformation of the “dieter” into a non-human is a pre-requisite for obtaining power and knowledge – a process that takes place within repeatedly provoked dream or ASPC experiences ideally presenting culturally determined and consciously

\(^{10}\) The complex around the “diet” has been described to some extent in almost every publication about western Amazonian people, for instance see Illius (1987), Tournon (2002) or LeClerc (2003) on the Shipibo-Konibo, or Frank (1994) on the Kakataibo, among many others. Although with different peoples, groups, families, and persons, many particularities can be observed, the fact of appliance, the durations, the overall modalities as well as expected results are fairly constant in the Peruvian lowlands (Brabec de Mori 2007).
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controlled content. When acquiring knowledge via “dieting”, the “dieter” experiences a form of “going native” among non-humans. This is not expressed in terms that e.g. the “dieter’s” soul (kaya, or any other instance detachable from the “dieter” as a physical person) travelled to the non-human’s realm, but rather that the fully conscious “dieter” completely transcends the interspecific border.

Therefore, during their training Western Amazonian médicos intentionally undergo a series of experiences where the consciously experiencing self is positioned as a (usually non-human) person among her “natural” peers and within her “natural” environment. The médico lives through the first-person experience of being a jaguar, for example. However, it is uncommon that during this experience the médico would think that he\textsuperscript{11} was a quadruped jaguar with spotted fur. Rather, the médico would experience that he, a biped human being with arms and hands, would meet with other human beings of similar appearance. Thus, following the reversion in perspectivism, the médico perceives himself as a human person among other human persons – although all persons involved in this experience would be seen as jaguars (spotted quadrupedes) by common Shipibo people observing the situation. It is important to note that such transformations are performed in solitude during periods of retreat (the “diet”). The potential of Shipibo commoners observing the transformation or encountering the transformed médico is minimal, though possible. Shipibo médico Pascual Mahua, for example, explains the dangers of such a transformation for both sides in dramatic terms: The transformed médico sees Shipibo people as prey (e.g. as peccary) and has to control himself in order to not eat them, while Shipibo would shoot the jaguar as soon as becoming aware of his presence, totally convinced by his physical form. Observed or not, with this experience, the médico knows what it is like being a jaguar.

The exclusiveness of such experiences for médicos is underlined, for example, by the musical genre of “funny songs”, osanti (Illius 1999: 227-230; Brabec de Mori 2011c). Osanti songs are apparently sung by animals through the mouth of the performing médico. Osanti means literally “to laugh”, and these songs are actually funny for Shipibo. Accordingly, they are used to make fun, and sometimes also during healing sessions in order to cheer up suffering patients. In any case, an animal singing an osanti song through the mouth of a médico is ridiculous by its mere appearance, or fails to sing “correctly”, producing “singing errors”. It is fairly surprising that osanti songs, although “known” to Shipibo commoners (in the sense of having heard prior performances and remembering lyrics and melody), are only

\textsuperscript{11} When referring to médicos, I use male forms because of the predominance of males among practitioners (93% in my survey).
to be performed by practising or retired médicos. Shipibo commoners consequently refuse to sing a funny little osanti song which does nothing magic or the like. The crucial implication is the “outing” of the singer as somebody who has had the first-person experience of what it is like to be an animal. Although animals who sing such “laughing songs” are not considered to be powerful in any sense, the mere act of performing a song from the animals’ perspective declares the singer to be powerful as somebody who is potentially able to obtain knowledge of what it is like to be this animal – obviously, only trained médicos are considered as such.

The animals recollected in osanti songs are never magically powerful. In my recordings of osanti songs there appear: the howler monkey (roo), the red monkey (joshin shino), the spider monkey (iso), the dog (ochiti), a vulture (xete), a baby parrot (bawa), two more birds (jenenponpo and abokoma), the land tortoise (mananxawe), three fish (ipo, amakiri, and koyaparo), one plant (the bush anta), and one nameless and powerless demon. There are no osanti songs by the anaconda, for example, or by the jaguar, or the pink river dolphin. In osanti songs, two important observations can be made: First, there is some distinction between the animal’s conscious experience of humanness compared to “Real People’s” experience. That is, the animals produce “singing errors” and fail correct pronunciation, for example; or they describe physical features that are “normal” for themselves but reveal their non-humanness. The red monkey sings about its flat nose, the vulture sings about its crown which is turned inside out, and the howler monkey sings about his wives’ wobbling buttocks. These animals perceive themselves as humans, but as humans with obvious bodily differences compared to “Real People”.

The second observation shows that the animals who sing osanti songs lack “competence of perception and action”. I have introduced this term in order to show that Shipibo people do not consider any non-human species to be equally powerful. Although a médico is in theory able to transform into a jenenponpo bird, for example, this will not serve him for curing or sorcery, because the jenenponpo shows lower competence in this sense than ordinary Shipibo people. Osanti songs can only be sung by animals who would view the Shipibo as superior, more powerful beings, so that Shipibo people can readily make fun of them and laugh about their inability to achieve easy tasks. For example, the mananxawe land tortoise sings about its great difficulties in crossing a fallen tree trunk, and Shipibo listeners imagine the poor tortoise trying again and again to climb the trunk and nearly die laughing (see Illius 1999: 230; Brabec de Mori 2011b: 421-422).

12 When médicos talk about plants’ “owners” (ibo), for example, similar physical distortions or revealing features may be observed (see Canayo 2004): some plants’ “owners” appear like dwarves, others show strangely coloured skin; the inoxatan-tree’s “owner” is easily revealed, because it has no head, but a big mouth on its breast.
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Conversely, other animals may sing in médicos’ performances that are not ridiculous. Songs from the point of view of verily powerful beings (anaconda, jaguar, dolphin, etc.) are very rarely sung by any médico – this is considered especially dangerous (see Illius 1987: 167; and ex. 3, for an anaconda song). A song not thus dangerous but still to be used well-dosed, is presented in the following example:

Ex. 1: Excerpts from an omen song by the bird chishka

Poor you who can only perceive close danger,
(you cannot see) from where
the demon’s song draws closer,
(but) everything that arrives (from afar)
we have already seen.
After we have seen them,
after we have seen (oncoming danger),
wherever you go,
where you will arrive,
where the day’s journey ends –
we are singing,
we sing during travel.
We are the tall standing tortoises (xawe)
people use to talk about,
they talk about the tortoises,
and the tortoises depart.
You cannot see dangers far away
the tortoises tell you,
we are the tortoises.

In this song, the birds’ superior competence especially of perception is made obvious by the way the birds describe their own purpose of warning the traveller of oncoming danger (lines 4-5). It is important to note here that the birds call themselves “tortoises” (xawe, which is not identical with the funny land tortoise mananxawe). In “correct” human singing, the term “tortoise” (xawe) is used to designate strong men from the local settlement. It is a poetic code for “Real People”, true Shipibo males. Here, the birds refer to themselves with that term, usually reserved for male locals,

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13 Ex. 1 was performed in 2005 by Herminia Sanancino Mozombite, Phonogrammarchiv D 5489 (full text in Brabec de Mori 2011b: 891-892). In this and the following examples, I have underlined evidentiality markers in the original lyrics (-ra/-ri- for first-hand evidence; -ronki for the reportative, cf. Valenzuela 2003). Further on, loanwords form Spanish or Kukama (in Ex. 2) are printed non-italizised in the original lyrics.
thus indicating that while singing they perceive themselves as “Real male People”. Also note that they address – through the human médico’s mouth – a human listener with “you”. However, in line 14, they address the listener’s fellows (who use to talk about the chishka bird as a bringer of ill omen) with the neutral term joni, person. We can observe that the birds, although owning superior competence of perception, do neither view the Shipibo as superior (as a more powerful spirit or demon, for example), nor do they view them as inferior beings (e.g. as prey). They are, in this sense, the Shipibos’ pares.

This song is a good example for a performance “on the edge” to neat magical curing or sorcery songs. Although it was sung to me in an explorative setting during a recorded interview with the singer, it is thought to be sung to somebody who is going to travel far and who will have to rely upon birds’ calls in order to determine travel schedule, or decide whether to follow a path or to avoid it. Despite many lingering dangers the traveller is unable to perceive, the summoned chishka birds will always warn the traveller in advance so she or he may reconsider.

Compared to osanti songs, we see that the chishka birds perceive themselves as humans, but neither do they reveal physical defects nor do they produce “singing errors”. They perform a “correct” and well pronounced human song. They experience themselves as “Real male People”. And, as can be noted in the lyrics, they apply the evidentiality marker -ra throughout.

4. Transformation and mimesis

Magical songs are usually not performed from a first-person perspective of singing non-humans. The reason seems to be the danger of being revealed before enemies if the médico openly identifies himself. Therefore, in magical songs a technique is applied that does not appear in any other song genre (besides osanti) and that is intrinsically connected with the performance of transformation: voice masking. Olsen (1996: 159-162) describes how voice masking is used in Warao curing songs as an indicator for entering and exiting transformed states, or provoked ASPC, by the performing médicos (wisiratu healers in Warao terminology):

[… the wisiratu’s voice is changed (masked), because the invoked helping hebu [spirit] has become the owner of the wisiratu’s voice. This interpretation suggests possession; however, the wisiratu is not possessed by the invoked helping hebu but transformed into it. […] Because the spirit sons dwell within his chest, they and the wisiratu are one entity during spiritual affairs such as curing; and the wisiratu’s masked voice is the hebu’s voice (Olsen 1996: 162, original italics).
In Shipibo magical song performance, a masked voice likewise indicates that the *médico* actually inhabits a transformed state (Shipibo term *naikia*). Voice masking is used to transmit the *médico*’s current experience of *what it sounds like* being transformed into a non-human entity. Shipibo *médico* Roberto Mori explained that during performance his voice would change, although he would go on singing like normal – say, the voice would still sound “human” (or “normal”) to him, but would sound masked for the audience. Here, the same bifurcation appears as in the “dieting” period described above: while the *médico* transforms in the eyes or ears of observers (here in sound, there in bodily form), his self-perception and cognition are still human, as well as his conscious experience. Further on, it is important to connect the masked voice with the contents of the lyrics. We observed that in magical songs the first-person perspective of the transformed *médico* is usually not made apparent. The singer describes from a third-person perspective what the non-humans are like, what they do and which actions they take in order to cure the patient. Non-humans are described as persons (human-like with head, torso, extremities, and so on, often manufacturing or using tools and advanced apparatus in order to execute their healing tasks). Other non-humans are likewise identified by the singing *médico* as the illness’ cause or origin. These non-humans – the singer’s enemies – are named, described (also as human persons), vanquished, or tricked and dismissed. However, during all these tasks, a masked voice indicates that during the performance the singer is one of these non-human entities (though he does not express it verbally). Here we can find another bifurcation of sensual perception and transmission: the *médico* transforms into a non-human being, indicated to his audience via voice masking but at the same time concealed from potentially dangerous spirits *yoshin* (who can understand the “spirits’ language”, the sung words).

The process of transformation (*naikiai*) can be distinguished from the process of mimesis (*paranai*). A hunter may whistle in the forest, imitating a male bird’s call, for example. Here, the hunter imitates the bird, but still consciously experiences his unchanged humanness. For the listening female bird, on the other hand, the hunter is actually transformed into an attractive male bird-person and she follows the call – ending up unluckily as the hunter’s dish. This technique of mimesis (*paranai*) can

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*Naikiai* denotes the general idea of transformation, it can be glossed as *na-iki-ai* (inside-being-continuative). Specific transformations into specific beings are allowed in Shipibo language by a simple process of creating intransitive verbs from names (e.g. *inoti* from *ino*, “jaguar”, “to transform into a jaguar”, or *yoshinti*, from *yoshin*, “demon”, “to transform into a demon”). *Paranai*, on the other hand, is generally used for “defending”, or, depending on its complement, “tricking” and “betraying”. See also Lewy (this volume) who deals extensively with acoustically and musically tricking “others”, as well as Taussig (1993: 104-111).
also be applied by a médico in order to trick enemy entities who therefore believe that he was one of them, until they come round caged and overthrown. From a third-person perspective (of e.g. an observing anthropologist) the two processes cannot be distinguished. The crucial difference is marked exclusively in the médico’s first-person experience. He is the only one who knows if he transforms into a non-human (naikiai) or if he mimics non-humans without transforming (paranai). Mimesis is generally preferred when dealing with beings that own lower competence of perception and action than the médico, say mainly when dealing with adverse entities (or in funny osanti songs). Transformation is preferred in cases when the médico deals with entities who dispose of higher competence than himself, ideally the allied forces he learned to work with during his “fieldwork”, his accomplished “dieting” periods. During my fieldwork, various rather renowned médicos explained to me in our discussions that when facing enemies too powerful and too perceptive in direct confrontation they used naikiai to transform into a powerful ally (indicated with a masked singing style), and then, from that perspective, applied the mimetic paranai powers of that allied entity in order to trick the enemies by presenting concealing and seductive wording in song lyrics. In the following excerpt, the singer tells us of the multiplied positionalities he uses to confront a powerful enemy sorcerer:

Ex. 2: Excerpts from a battle song (*chipotitian iká*)¹⁵

| 1   | bobinzana bobinzana | The bobinzana (bush, species) |
| 2   | meráyakan jonirökö ikarai | meráya-person, so it is told, is singing ikaró songs: |
| 3   | nanainanai nanainanai | “nanainanai nanainanai |
| 4   | tinkontinkonti tinkontinkonti | tinkontinkonti tinkontinkonti” |
| 5   | eoronkö ikarai | I, so it is told, am singing ikaró songs |
| 6   | yami ewan parankaya | on the very river of great metal. |
| 7   | bewávokí beñí | The bewá songs are approaching, |
| 8   | beañtianra | and when they arrive, |
| 9   | ramakaya akínra | we begin right now. |
| 10  | bobinzana meraya | The bobinzana-meráya (says): |
| 11  | ea rükí yoshinkó | “I am the yashingo (plant)”, |
| 12  | itai merayan | this is what the meráya says. |
| 13  | shanka ewan tarani | In order to roll the great rocks, |
| 14  | tarañai jürña | the person rolls forward, |

¹⁵ Ex. 2 was performed in 2006 by an anonymised médico, access to the recording restricted. In the recorded version, no voice masking was used because of the simulative setting. When I heard the same singer performing a similar song during a curing ritual in 2011, he sung in a masked voice.
This is a fairly complicated song. In the beginning, the singer states (in third-person observation, suffix -ronki), that the powerful plant-médico16 bobinzana is singing ikarō songs – a deliberate quotation of downriver Kukama practices: ikarō is a Kukama term, as well as bobinzana; and the uttering of filler syllables in lines 3-4 mimics (!) Kukama ikarō singing style. In line 5-9, the perspective is switched, and transformation occurs (the suffix -ra is then used for the remainder of the song): Now the first-person singer performs ikarō songs (but here the recorded melody switches from Kukama ikarō style to Shipibo mashá style!). The singer is now localised on a river of metal, resembling the battlefield (bobinzana bushes grow on rocks on the shores of Ucayali tributaries). Songs are approaching, appearing like a gathering thunderstorm.17 Here, we encounter a use of the term bewá (a song genre) synonymous with niwe (“aura”, “individual essence”, “wind”, cf. Illius 1992, see also lines 23-25). When the enemy’s songs arrive, the confrontation starts.

This means that the first task of the battle is an identity change (lines 10-12, observed from a third-person perspective) of the plant bobinzana, who mimics (!) another plant, the yashingo. Then the battle starts, and the singing person rolls forward his rocks (taranai indicates a movement comparable to a rotating chainsaw). The singer has dressed these rocks as a shirt (Viveiros de Castro 1997: 110) in purpose of destroying approaching demons. In the last presented sequence, the singer describes the enemy’s song, now as niwe, again synonymously with bewá: the “song-aura” is extending, and within, demon horses rise around the enemy person.

The song is much longer, and more instances of power are mentioned later on. In the depicted sequence we can observe, that the bobinzana bush, as well as the mimicked yashingo bush are considered powerful médico-persons. Further on, the rocks are a person, because they contain the bobinzana-yashingo-singer who has put them

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17 According to Mori Silvano de Brabec (pers. comm. 2009), in Shipibo everyday discourse an arising thunderstorm can metaphorically be called a demon’s song (bewá), e.g. jikikanwe moa bakebo, yoshiman bewára beai, “enter the house, children, a demon’s song is arriving!”.
on as a shirt. Finally, the enemy is regarded a person (we do not know if the enemy sorcerer is a fellow human or a non-human entity. This does not matter in the given context of battle).

In case of mimesis, the médico (as well as the hunter, or the bobinzana plant-médico) is aware of his humanness and the localisation of his consciousness does not change. During transformation, the médico still experiences himself as a human person, but localised within the sphere (niwe) of the class of beings he transformed into, and he perceives himself surrounded by human persons, who, to other Shipibo (and anthropologists) would appear as animals, plants, or clinical beings. Here, the médico’s conscious perception is re-localised in another place (the “river of metal” in Ex. 2) – although this place still pertains to what we call the world. The lyrics plus comments by the singer suggest that during the state of being transformed into a non-human person the transformed médico perceives the world that appears “normal” for other Shipibo (the tributary river’s shores) as a surrounding for agency (the “river of metal”) from the non-humans’ point of view. If the singer’s body, during that state, is constituted by different “affects”, as Viveiros de Castro argues, we can note here that also his environment shows very different qualities. If the bobinzana’s body inherits the potential of rolling rocks (bobinzana plants actually move rocks, although rather slowly by growing their roots), this is well documented in the lyrics. However, the world (the interior of the bobinzana’s niwe) does not correlate with or appear similar to the Shipibo world. Shipibo people never roll rocks on rivers of metal. The niwe of a certain species appears similar to a thunderstorm, or as a certain smell or colour (see Illius 1992) from its outside, but from the inside it constitutes a world with qualitites different from the common Shipibo world.

Ex. 2 also shows that this “multi-nature” can be synonymous with “song” (bewá). The enemy’s song extends around him as his world – the song strengthens and extends the singer’s environment. From the enemy’s point of view, the first singer’s song appears in the same way, though reversed, as threat.18

With that, I suppose, when performing funny osanti songs, the performing médico does not actually transform into, for example, a jenenponpo bird, but imitates its song through mimesis. However, “correct” mimesis of a bird in Shipibo understanding is only possible if one knows what it is like being a bird, say if one owns the “transformative faculty” (Brabec de Mori 2011c), the potential ability to transform into one. Contrarily, when performing more delicate songs like Ex. 2, the perspective

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18 A more detailed analysis of how Shipibo médicos construct and work with the technical tool (kano in vernacular language, see below) and the ontological aspect (niwe) of transformation I undertook elsewhere (Brabec de Mori 2007); a model of the corresponding “musical multiverse” including these concepts is treated in Brabec de Mori (2011b: 444-447).
is not made clear. It can be extrapolated by analysis that the singer transforms into a *bobinzana* plant, who then mimics a *yashingo* plant. Thereafter, it is not exactly clear who, from which perspective, is battling the demons, horses, and finally the enemy sorcerer. This is part of the singer’s strategy of concealment, so that he may not be identified, named, and overthrown by the enemy.

Ex. 3: Excerpts from a curing song against anaconda influence
(*roniman kopiaki ikā*)

| 1   | *ronin nete kanonbira*       | Within the *kano* of the anaconda’s light       |
| 2   | *yakaakekainax*              | I sat down, and from there,                     |
| 3   | *earonki bewai*              | so it is told, I am singing.                    |
| 4   | *bewai kai*                  | singing, I advance,                             |
| 5   | *earonki bewai*              | it is told that I am singing.                   |
| 6   | *oinoinbokinra*              | We will see carefully,                          |
| 7   | *jawekekatimain*             | how it could be done,                          |
| 8   | *nato bake ikai*             | how this child could (be healed),              |
| 9   | *iikai*                      | how it could be.                               |
| 10  | *en roniman kopiaronki*      | I, the anaconda, have influenced (the child),  |
| 11  | *enronkia*                   | I, so it is told,                              |
| 12  | *aabainai*                   | I am doing it while advancing [...]             |

In Ex. 3, the singer first mentions *kano*. *Kano* denotes the tools or frameworks that are manipulated through song and that allow for the construction of a “way” or “path” transcending interspecific borders, or the construction of specific places in the singer’s altered perception (*kano* is most often applied when singing during ASPC induced by hallucinogens). The term involves an implicit sense of directed power.20 Whereas the term *niwe*, explained with Ex. 2, stands for the specific environment or “atmosphere” around any being, consistent with others of the same species, *kano* is tied to the singing individual. It extends – primarily audible but also synaesthetically visualisable in ASPC – from the singer into the world. Thus, it constitutes the “audio-perspective” of the singer, preliminarily correlating with perspectivism’s “video-perspective”. We shall see to which extent this correlation can be maintained and at which point problems emerge.

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19 Ex. 3 was performed in 2005 by José Alvarado Marrona, Phonogrammarchiv D 5498 (see also Brabec de Mori 2011b: 440-441 and 895-896).

20 In everyday life, e.g. *kanóti* (“which makes kano”) denotes a hunting bow; *kano* may also stand for the part of the river where the current is strongest, besides other meanings, e.g. “framework” (the pillars of a house or the thickest lines in an art pattern, for example).
In lines 1-5, the singer explains that he sat down in this *kano*-perspective of the anaconda. He uses this perspective (in lines 6-9) to obtain knowledge (by seeing!) of what happened to his patient, a child who was influenced by an anaconda.\(^{21}\) Note that in lines 1 and 6 the singer applies the marker *-ra* for highest evidentiality. This is where he directly transmits his perception: he “sees” from the anaconda’s perspective. Both the *kano*-perspective in line 1 and the perception in his anaconda-like seeing from that perspective in line 6 are regarded evident. In the passages with *-ronki*, on the other hand, the singer quotes a (fictional) observer who is commenting on what the singer is doing (this is part of the lyrics’ trickery, or mimesis). This is another instance expressing the singer’s transition into another subject’s position while he partly maintains concealment in the lyrics. Here as well as in Ex. 2 the singers masterfully play with these ambiguities.

Line 10 represents the crucial point when the singing *médico* identifies himself with the illness’ cause: “I, the anaconda”. The singer has infiltrated the anaconda’s perspective and finally identifies with her. Thereupon he obtains control over the situation. The song goes on, and the singer subsequently describes how he advances further, singing, and detaching the anaconda’s *niwe* from the child, and finally relocating the child’s *kaya* (“soul”) in her physical body, so that the child will be healthy again. All these curing actions are not mentioned directly by the singer, but by the (fictional) observer he quotes. His double positionality can now be understood perfectly: In the song lyrics he expresses that in his own perspective, from the “inside”, he is the enemy anaconda, while from the “outside”, “so it is told”, he is the curing *médico*. This double positionality is further multiplied (and reversed) in the observers’ eyes: as a curing *médico* wearing a voice mask he appears transformed into an anaconda-person for his audience, while he still experiences himself (being the anaconda) as a human person with human consciousness.

5. **Collective transformation**

There are accounts, hitherto unexplored in literature, about collective, apparently religious rituals Shipibo people performed until a time still remembered by some elders (maybe until around 1965), when – due to their accounts – a “correct” lifestyle and with that, more potent magical power was still in place. These rituals are called

\(^{21}\) In the case of *irabana*, or *kopia*, the anaconda attaches its *niwe* to the child, which then would become ill (Illius 1992). First, its “soul” *kaya* would be taken away by the anaconda, and then the child would be transformed slowly as it would be dragged into the multi-nature (*niwe*) of the anaconda.
mochai. During my fieldwork, I recorded eleven mochai songs and a few interviews about contents of the corresponding rituals. It seems that a singular (‘the’ mochai ritual) cannot be applied, but a pluralistic view on past mochai rituals is necessary. I could isolate three main tendencies for mochai songs’ functions, that is (i) the purpose of “curing” sun or moon during eclipses, (ii) the purpose of summoning and meeting certain non-human entities, and, (iii) still in use by some médicos, the purpose of curing patients in severe conditions in the context of healing sessions. These tendencies are not mutually exclusive but may overlap. For all mochai rituals in (i) and (ii), collective participation is a prerequisite, and, clearly indicated in the given accounts, without ingesting any drug. All accounts coincide in descriptions of a circle formed by the participants and of a statue or cross that is erected in the centre, as well as in necessary guidance by a powerful meriya médico. When worshiping and mochai singing had started, something seems to have happened:

Ex. 4: Mochai song for summoning Inka

1  rai santon keweni  From the patterned king of statues
2  keweni parora  the patterned river emanates,
3  non kewé parora  our river of patterns.
4  rai santon keweni  From the patterned king of statues
5  keweni parora  upon the patterned river
6  ron tsaanai  resounding with a boom (they are arriving).
7  noa beaitian  When we bring them (back) here,
8  mai nayatai  the earth is trembling,
9  shinan wekanyamawe  so do not allow your concentration to falter!
10  rai kaibobo  (our) royal kin,
11  ja bonitoninbi  the same way that once took them away
12  inkabora beai  is now bringing the Inka people back,
13  ja beaitian  and when they arrive,
14  mai nayatai  the earth is trembling,
15  shinan wekanyamawe  so do not allow your concentration to falter!
16  rai kaibobo  (our) royal kin,
17  noa rai jonibo  we are the royal persons
18  koros manichimea  with a cross erected in the centre.

22 The mochai rituals, or at least the word, are mentioned in some ethnographies, but I have still not encountered a passage longer than one or two sentences about forms or content (see Brabec de Mori 2011b: 447-464).
23 Ex. 4 performed by Claudio Sánchez Serafín, Phonogrammarchiv D 5346.
In lines 1-5, a somehow esoteric picture is drawn which suggests an ASPC, but as indicated above, no drugs were ingested: The statue, decorated with design patterns (*kené*) and *kewé* emanates a river of patterns. This suggests a strong collective focusing which “turns off” the ordinary perception of the external world. Subsequently, a great booming sound heralds oncoming entities, who make the earth tremble with their arrival. Participants could flee in terror, indicated by the repeated warning not to give way in lines 9 and 15. Further on, we have to pay attention to the distribution of the loan word *rai* (Spanish *rey*, king), obviously indicating some kind of superiority. The term is twice applied for the statue-cross which resembles a person. On the river emerging from this cross-person-statue, persons arrive who are called *Inka*. In line 10 and 16, *rai* is applied to *kaibobo*, kin people. While in line 10, *rai* probably refer to the arriving *Inka* (and if so, also in line 16), in line 17, “we” are these royal people who have erected the cross (which does not resemble a person here). A process of identification appears here, (i) the statue becomes a royal person, (ii) from this person more royal persons, the *Inka*, emerge and (iii) upon arrival, the participants and the *Inka* share the royal identity, while they do not see the cross as royal anymore.

Among Shipibo, the *Inka* are considered “legendary” but definitely real people. These *Inka* retired from the invading Spaniards into remote regions of the world in order to not mingle with people who lived in such an “incorrect” way as the Spaniards, mestizos and contemporary Shipibo. The *Inka* are considered technologically advanced, having x-rays and any imaginable “health machines” at their disposal, as well as great battleships apt to beat back the disliked invaders when time is ripe.

The *Inka* occupy a different *niwe*, a different section of the world. It seems that the *mochai* performance was a collective magical-religious experience which enabled the ardently singing Shipibo to summon and collectively identify with the *Inka*. These *Inka* appear sometimes synonymous to God or the Sun, but sometimes synonymous to the *simpibo jonibo*, who are considered terribly threatening demons, a source of maximal destructive power. With *mochai* rituals, Shipibo people did not

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24 For the intracultural significance of *kené* and *kewé* desings or patterns, see Illius (1987: 156-172), LeClerc (2003: 227-251), or Brabec de Mori & Mori Silvano de Brabec (2009).

25 The “cross” is explicitly mentioned in line 18. That the statue resembled a person is included in the term *santo*, twice used with *rai*. The Shipibo term *santo* denotes miniature figurines of male or female Shipibo people carved from wood and usually dressed up in striking detail (e.g. the mini-garments they wear are embroidered or painted with *kewé* designs). It may be derived from Spanish *santo*, “saint”.

26 This millennarian interpretation of an Incaic *reconquista* may as well result from Christian and syncretistic messianic ideas, like Juan Santos Atahualpa’s revolution in 1767 and newer movements (Ochoa Abaurre 2002).
only “cure” sun, moon, or patients, but also collectively transcended the borders of their own niwe – the world “we” (the Shipibo) live in – and united and identified themselves with the people they could have been if they had followed them into exile, into departing parts of the world.  

6. Sonic perspectivism

With the analysis of four Shipibo magical song texts, their performance contexts, and comments by the singers I have contributed to theorising indigenous concepts of the person, of consciousness, and of both human and non-human persons’ position-alities in the cosmos.

The results from analysing musically accompanied or induced ASCP which are deliberately provoked and experienced by trained médicos contradict the interpretation that the ascription of human consciousness and physical appearance to non-humans occurs due to anthropomorphism as proposed for example by Turner (2009) or Karadimas (2004, and in this volume). The ascription is not the result of projecting one’s own “exemplarised” (Lehrer 2006) experience of self-consciousness to others, but the result of a “full blown” experience of transforming into and communicating with these others in their human(oid) physical forms and consciousness. Shipibo médicos who obtained such experiences communicate these to their audience by playing with intermedial tools, like voice masking for indicating transformed states, enigmatic song lyrics for concealing their own positionalities, and bodily transformations during their training periods which may potentially be eyewitnessed by not-transformed Shipibo observers.

This phenomenology, exclusively enacted by médicos, confirms the principal programmatic concepts of perspectivism and multinaturalism. But there are important details to be noted. In Shipibo understanding, humanoid physicality is universal to conscious beings – in contrast to human physicality as proposed by “orthodox” perspectivism. Certain animals (e.g. land tortoises or howler monkeys), certain spirits and “owners” (ibo) of plants do perceive themselves as humanoid, as jonibo, persons, but with distinguishing features in both their physicality as well as their competence of perception and action. For example, howler monkeys have wobbly buttocks, and cannot sing correctly. Such entities are often protagonists in Shipibo osanti songs. Shipibo people are more powerful in perception and action and can

27 The phenomenon of populations who once dwelled together with the ancestors of today’s ordinary people and then retired on their own decision (though in most cases not exactly voluntarily) into aspects of the world that depart from “our’s” – and which can only be visited by trained or lucky people – was called “the fairy syndrome” by Evelyne Puchegger-Ebner (pers. comm., 2006). It appears in many societies and ontologies around the world.
readily make fun of them. Additionally, there are also species, most of them plants or fish, who are not regarded to even believe that they were human, and no consciousness is ascribed to them, they are not jonibo. On the other hand, there are beings equally or more powerful than Shipibo people, like the chishka bird (Ex. 1: Excerpts from an omen song by the bird chishka), jaguars, anacondas (Ex. 3), or pink river dolphins. These persons understand themselves exactly like Shipibo understand themselves, as “Real People”, jonikon, but in most cases dispose of even higher competence of perception and action than Shipibo. Of such beings, no fun can be made lest one would reveal suicidal tendencies. On the contrary, they have to be pacified in order to avert the dangers they would pose to a Shipibo community if unchallenged. Dealing with all these beings, including the least competent ones, is exclusively the duty of specialists.

In order to conclude about the ontological qualities of perception and action in the given context, I have to stress the importance of the sonic compared to the visual: Shipibo médicos excessively use visual metaphors and descriptions not only when reporting from their experiences but also in their song lyrics. However, the visual stays within the framework of metaphorical language and retains a merely descriptive function. The audible, on the other hand, may function for descriptive purposes, too, but in depth it is the tool for achieving mimesis, transformation, and the construction of worlds. Without singing, or at least formalised uttering of words (boman, see Brabec de Mori 2009), such tasks cannot be performed, not even by ingesting psychoactive drugs. By “dressing up” in voice masks, Shipibo singers do not only indicate their state of current transformation (or mimesis), but actually enact this state: It is said among Shipibo that the former powerful médicos, the meráya, could transform into spirits and even physically disappear, by mere proper (masked) singing of magical songs. This is also indicated by mochai song lyrics (Ex. 4), a genre that was collectively performed in former times without drug ingestion but still resulting in severe collective ASCP, or transformed states. Therefore, going with Lewy (this volume), hearing and sound production, specifically music performance, constitute key elements in transcending interspecific borders.

With that, the most important inconsistency of the above mentioned “audio-perspective” (kano) with perspectivism’s “video-perspective” is addressed: the sonic connects perception with agency in its phenomenology as well as in the human body (or bundle of affects). Although the visual also allows for agency (by dressing up in any “clothes”, including masks), an act of seeing cannot be connected

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28 The mochai lyrics analysed here (and similar texts) can still be interpreted as descriptive metaphors, but comments and explanations by elders who had participated in mochai rituals indicate that perceptions e.g. of arriving spirits were perfectly real to them.
with effect in the way utterance effects agency. Focusing on the visual, it is impossible to understand the agency of médicos (or “shamans”) affecting the environment. Therefore it is logical that wearing or not wearing masks affects the body, an observation reflected in Viveiros de Castro’s “somatic perspectivism” (1997: 108), resulting in a multinaturalism centered on the nature of the (human or non-human) body. The “audio-perspective” constituted by the term kano in médicos’ songs, on the other hand, suggests a “sonic perspectivism”, or a multinaturalism encompassing the whole “nature” of an environment, constituted by the term niwe, as perceived by a person in her surroundings. As was shown with the brief description of mochai rituals, this “sonic perspectivism” therefore results in an “ambient multinaturalism” and also allows for collective transformations much more consistently than e.g. the collective wearing of masks, because of the intrinsic environmental quality (“ambience”) of sound perception and production.

Shipibo ethnography therefore suggests that indeed, as proposed by Viveiros de Castro, each society of animals, plants, spirits, and non-Shipibo people share their respective perspective on the world and perceive their environment with intra-specific commensurability. However, the concepts of niwe and kano are dynamically loaded with multiple meanings. Such meanings underline the intrinsic quality of agency in “sonic perspectivism”: e.g. the launching of an arrow from a bow (kanóti, “which makes kano”) does not connect to Viveiros de Castro’s perspectives, but is clearly related to what Shipibo people understand as directing magical power – this is what médicos do when positioning themselves within the anaconda’s perspective (ronin kano), for example. Similarly, niwe (which also means “air”, “wind”, “aura”, or “smell”) is as dynamic as a thunderstorm, may arise and dissipate, can be constructed, held and extended by song performance (and vanishes with the song’s end), but is at the same time the ever distinctive “nature” of an “ambient multinaturalism”, wherein humans and non-humans dwell respectively. The qualities of perception, localisation, and action within a niwe are as dynamic and loaded with differences as the term niwe is. The ambience can be constructed by sonic utterance, perceived synaesthetically and communicated in visual metaphors which finally indicate that e.g. the bobinzana-plant-persons’ environment does not look like the Shipibo-persons’ environment. The médicos’ communications about their explorations in visual metaphors may confirm animism’s constant claim that non-humans share human culture in the sense that non-humans (as humanoid persons) in their environment behave like humans (drinking maniok beer, dressing in cushmas, etc), but they do so localised in an environment which is radically different from the environment of “Real People” (Shipibo) in ordinary circumstances.
Concluding my argument I propose that the evidence of experience has to be regarded more influential to the construction of human and non-human sociability than the descriptive and explanatory quality of narratives. In Shipibo language, evidentiality is clearly expressed by certain grammatical features. In the limited scope of this paper, the marker -ra/-ri- was seen in the lyrics examples to indicate first-person experience representing the highest degree of evidence in contrast to the reportative marker -ronki, indicating third-person observation, hearsay, or narration (like myths). Unlike in naturalistic science, where evidence can be achieved only by the means of observation and reproduction by third persons, in Shipibo ontology the experience of the first person is considered more valid (especially if the first person is a renowned médico). Therefore it is possible that dreams or provoked ASPC provide perception and experience of “the ‘real reality’ of the multiplicity of intangible worlds and spiritual body essences” (Santos-Granero 2003: 180). The grading of evidentiality explains why this “real reality” is considered more important and even more valid than everyday experience. The humanness or humanoidness of non-humans within indigenous ontology is not an ascription due to anthropomorphism but a fact due to epistemic evidence provided by médicos.

With that I suggest to ever again pay attention to indigenous praxis in order to understand their lived worlds and ontological positions. I think that neither it is sufficient to analyse and compare myths and other narratives (although it may help), nor just to look and see (which may help, too). Going with Classen (2005) and Santos-Granero (2006), I argue that all senses and modes of expression (including those not present in naturalism, like Santos-Granero’s “noncorporeal modes of sensing and knowing”) must be considered when intending to understand indigenous ontology. As was shown in this paper, sound, hearing and utterance prove essential for transcending interspecific boundaries and interacting with non-human persons.

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