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# Song Patterns and Sung Designs<sup>1</sup>

## The Invention of Tradition among Amazonian Indians as a Response to Researchers' Inquiries

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**Abstract:** The Shipibo-Konibo are an Amazonian indigenous group in Eastern Peru. During centuries they have had contact with missionaries, settlers, exploiters, and researchers. Shipibo-Konibo are very popular among researchers of various areas as well as among tourists. The cause for this popularity may lie in the combination of easy geographic accessibility, spectacular artwork, and the practice of “shamanism” including a hallucinogenic drug (*ayawaska*). Especially “*ayawaska* shamanism” and related topics have been studied extensively during the last three decades. The ritual complex around *ayawaska* includes magical songs. Visions induced by the drug often mirror the quality of the indigenous group’s “traditional” geometric designs. During the 1980s, a German anthropologist

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proposed that Shipibo “shamans” could sing the designs as if they were coded music, not unlike a notation; and by singing “pattern songs”, they could evoke corresponding designs in their visionary drug experience. This hypothesis was not only accepted in the scientific community, but even more enthusiastically in popular literature and in the end by Shipibo-Konibo people themselves. Nowadays, many Indians present these ideas as a core “tradition of their tribe” — and researchers can observe and record many opportunities of its actual practice. However, according to newer studies (see references), this concept was not a part of Shipibo-Konibo life before it was introduced by anthropologists.

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

**Keywords:** Lowland South America, Shipibo-Konibo, invention of tradition, vocal music, pattern art.

## ☞ 1. Introduction

The Shipibo-Konibo (or Shipibo) are an indigenous group comprising about 45.000 individuals, who dwell mainly on the shores of the Ucayali River in Eastern Peru, in the western Amazonian rainforest lowlands. They are the biggest and only fluvial group of the Pano linguistic family. The Shipibo are well-known because of their fine artwork, manifesting especially in elaborate geometric patterns (called *kené* or *kewé*) applied to textiles, ceramics, and carved wooden items. Since around 1965, much research was done among them, in different disciplines like archaeology, anthropology, or linguistics; also ethnomedical research has been conducted on the group, mainly regarding the medical or “shamanic” use

of plants, most prominently the hallucinogenic brew *ayawaska* (called *nishi* or *oni* in Shipibo-Konibo language).<sup>2</sup>

Because of their easy accessibility (the regional capital city of Pucallpa can easily be reached on the road or by airplane, and many Shipibo settlements can be visited via one-day boat-trips from Pucallpa), in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Shipibo suffered a relative oversaturation with researchers doing fieldwork, at least compared to neighbouring groups like the Kukama, Asháninka, Yine, or Kakataibo, although both Kukama and Asháninka count larger populations. During the 1950s and 1960s, the archaeologists Harry Tschopik and Donald Lathrap (1970) drew attention to their artwork, and Peter Roe (1982) worked intensely on Shipibo artwork and mythology during the 1970s. In the 1980s, Jacques Tournon (2002) started to do ethnobotanical fieldwork, Bruno Illius (1987) conducted research on Shipibo shamanism, and Angelika Gebhart-Sayer (1987) undertook a synthesis of artwork, music and shamanism/healing which had a wide response among other researchers. Since then, many studies have been done especially on the complex around arts and shamanism.

## ☞ 2. *The role of music*

Among the Shipibo, as well as most neighbouring indigenous groups, music is an important issue, especially when it comes to curing. There is some evidence that already before the rubber boom between circa 1870 and 1920, songs and theatrical performance was maybe the most important aspect of curing rituals, which may have included many processes which are rare these days. It appears, for example, that possession by or transformation into animals played a much higher role then, and music, specifically songs,<sup>3</sup> were the preferred mode of communication with these animals, and also the only possibility for animals or spirits who took possession of the healer to express their message among the human listeners.

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

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

However, there is no clear distinction between magical and non-magical songs in Shipibo terminology and understanding. Also songs performed at drinking parties or for courtship maintain a certain degree of magical energy, as people are viewed as animals in the songs' lyrics and the performance itself targets a certain manipulation of the current lived world (in order to have your desired partner fall in love with you, for example, or singing for the companionship of the legendary "hidden" Shipibo whom they call *chaikoni jonibo* and who are known to appear at drinking feasts where especially good singers are performing). There are also many songs which are said to have certain effects on the person they are sung to, like the songs for attracting fish or game animals, for "curing" somebody to become a good hunter or a better artist, and so on. Finally, and still apart from what we would understand as "magical" or "medical" songs performed for healing purposes, there is certain historical evidence of the *mochai* ritual, which is not performed anymore either. The *mochai* is almost unknown to anthropological studies about Shipibo history, and it seems to have comprised a collective adoration of the Sun, the "curing" of sun or moon in cases of eclipse, and in certain cases, the summoning of delicately powerful animal-human double beings called *simpibo jonibo*. The core of this ritual were the *mochai* songs.<sup>4</sup>

In healing rituals, the importance of music is rather obvious, because songs are performed in all cases where healing occurs. The most discrete performance is the whistling (*koxonti*) of certain melodies in order to "charge" a carrier substance (usually a cigar, a tobacco pipe, a perfume, or any remedy to be administered to a patient) with the power of the song. Therefore, the melody is whistled, the object held close to the mouth, and the song's lyrics are *thought* by the healer during this performance. When the "charged" object is used (smoked, applied, ingested), the power of the magical song should unfold and cause the intended effects. This "charging",

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4 The author recorded eleven *mochai* songs by different singers. One can find three categories or purposes of *mochai* singing: (i) adoration of the rising sun, summoning the sun or "healing" the sun or the moon during eclipses; (ii) a religious ceremony of collective prayer which is not necessarily directed to the sun, but rather to meet with the world of more powerful beings like the *inka* and their counterparts, the *simpibo jonibo*; and (iii) the application of *mochai* songs within curing rituals in order to perform especially difficult tasks of curing on a patient who is seriously ill (See BRABEC DE MORI 2011b: 447–465).

*koxonti*, can also be executed with singing and pronouncing the lyrics, but this is rather seldom (cf. OLSEN 1996: 259–260 on the Warao *hoa* songs).

### ≡ 3. ‘*Ayawaska Shamanism*’

Another option is the directed singing towards the patient (or victim). This is most often performed during curing sessions, when *ayawaska* is ingested. The healer will wait until the drug takes effect and then start his<sup>5</sup> songs. In Shipibo contexts, usually three categories of songs are used, the *bewá* (derived from artistic songs with a specific descending melodic model in two sections), *mashá* (derived from the round-dance music sung at drinking parties, with a strict repetition section and consequent four-beat phrasing), and *ikaro* (imported from the north by Kichwa-, Kukama-, and Spanish-speaking settlers together with the use of *ayawaska* with different melodic and rhythmic features. *Ikaros* forms are exclusively sung during *ayawaska* sessions). These song categories can change with each song; which musical form is chosen, depends on the individual. Some healers may sing more *ikaro*-type songs, others may sing mainly *bewá*, for example.

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

In all three cases, the healer whistles or sings determined musical sequences he chose in order to accomplish a certain process. However, it is not obvious, which melodic, rhythmic or dynamic features are related to which processes (like summoning allies, calling upon divine forces or praying, scaring away negative influences, cleaning diseased parts of the

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<sup>5</sup> I use male forms when referring to the healers because, in my survey, 45 out of the 50 healers I have been working with were male. 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.

body, or fighting enemy healers or sorcerers). Every healer has learned a certain repertoire of melodies which are sometimes taken from songs outside the curing context, sometimes learned or adapted from teachers (usually a family member: father, grandfather or uncle) and sometimes made up by the healer himself. Therefore, every single healer uses a different repertoire of melodies. Also the singing style differs from one individual to the other. Some sing in very high-pitched registers, some prefer intense nasalization, some sing in fairly fast tempi, and so on, while others do not. Despite this individual stylistic freedom, some generalisations can be undertaken. High-pitched falsetto singing, for example, usually indicates that the singer is in contact with powerful divine beings, who perform in very high pitches themselves. However, falsetto singing is not a necessary prerequisite to make contact with such beings. Some healers also apply voice masking (OLSEN 1996: 159–162), depending on the beings they are in contact with, so that the respective being seems to lend his/her voice to the singer. However, it is still the “translated song”, produced by the singer, we i.e. the audience can hear, because he still uses a human (Shipibo) melody and rhythm and in most cases pronounce human (Shipibo) language in his lyrics. The communication with these beings is evidenced by the masked voice, with the singer imitating the singing style of the corresponding non-human beings, whose singing only he can perceive (cf. BRABEC DE MORI 2007). The song appears as a “bodily-exterior manifestation of [...] knowledge and power” (Gow 2001: 144).

#### ☞ 4. *The Emergence of the ‘Aesthetic Therapy’*

The song categories mentioned above, with their individual interpretations, represent in fact a very precise art and a certain craftsmanship. The singers have to learn melodies and common phrases from their teachers or other singers in their community, and then they have to train in long retreats how to contact non-human beings. When they conclude their year-long training period, they should be able to contact these non-human beings at will and sing together with them in order to cure (or to inflict). However, these songs were seldom analysed in broad comparative studies, only their fragments taken out of the initial context. Moreover they were translated without the

necessary profound understanding of the metaphors and codes included in the Shipibo's "worldview" (as if this would exist as a singular phenomenon).<sup>6</sup>

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

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

Surprisingly, this hypothesis which was found to be a speculative European idea<sup>7</sup> lacking any evidence in the history or recent practice among

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6 For relatively comprehensive and complete sequences of translated texts from *ayawaska* sessions see e.g. MEYER 1974: 56–66, ILLIUS 1987: 300–383 and 1999: 250–252, TOURNON 1991: 183–201. Especially the translations by Illius stand out positively. See also BRABEC DE MORI 2011b: 426–446.

7 Bruno Illius (personal communication, 2011), who accompanied Gebhart-Sayer in the field in the early 1980s explained that the error was primarily conceptual: Gebhart-

Shipibo people, was also reinterpreted by the Shipibo people themselves. By implementing Gebhart-Sayer's work (even by incorrect or erroneous quotations, see BRABEC DE MORI 2011b: 69–79), many researchers got mesmerized, and visiting the field, asked Shipibo people about those phenomena. In most of the cases (as it happened in my own fieldwork) Shipibo laypeople would say that they did not know about such songs, or designs. However, a few people who were in close contact with Gebhart-Sayer, among them the Shipibo artist Herlinda Agustín, started to take up this idea and produce such songs or designs themselves. This happened in the 1990s, and Agustín was fairly successful in reproducing Gebhart-Sayer. She even held an explanation why common Shipibo people would not know about these techniques: because they were ignorant to their “true tradition” and have forgotten it all. Mainly through this mediation by Agustín, Gebhart-Sayer's speculative hypothesis more recently entered into ethnographic reports, for example by Martin (2005) or Rittner (2007). They presented healers who actually *did* cover their patients with embroidered textiles before singing corresponding pattern songs under the influence of *ayawaska* — of course together with their (Western) patients. Thus they employ a healing technique they readily explain, based on “healing patterns”, “design songs”, and “visions” of sung designs during *ayawaska* influence. This practice can be observed mainly in the native community of San Francisco de Yarina-cocha, where most tourists and inexperienced researchers reach out to meet Shipibo people for the first time.

### ≡ 5. *Origins, authenticity, and tradition*

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

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Sayer mistook “metaphor” and “synaesthesia”. Shipibo singers who used metaphors of design in their song lyrics did not (as Gebhart-Sayer believed) describe their actual sensual experiences. It is important to note here that Illius, who is often quoted in concordance with Gebhart-Sayer, does not agree that designs could be sung or songs put into designs (see explicitly ILLIUS 1987: 167, footnote). For further details in this case of misinterpretation and reinterpretation of the misinterpreted, see also BRABEC DE MORI AND MORI SILVANO DE BRABEC 2009a, 2009b, and BRABEC DE MORI 2011b: 59–81.



(or *peruano*) society. However, some tendencies appeared, which led to a re-indigenisation of most Peruvian rainforest societies:

- › the missionary-linguistic labours of the *Summer Institute of Linguistics* (SIL, established 1947–2002 in Yarinacocha) among most indigenous groups;
- › the land reform of the Sistema Nacional de Movilización Social (SINAMOS) under the government of General Velasco in the early 1970s which granted communal land titles for native villages, the *comunidades nativas*;
- › the growing interest of anthropologists especially in the Shipibo-Konibo,<sup>8</sup> and therefore a confrontation with many questions regarding “traditions”, “original culture”, “knowledge of the past elders”, and so on, and finally
- › since William Burroughs, but massively for about three decades now, an invasion by “individual tourists”, “eco-tourists”, “spiritual tourists” (JERVIS forthcoming) and “shaman’s-pupil-tourists”.

All these tendencies helped to manipulate the indigenous people’s social position in favourable ways compared to the fluvial *mestizo*, who were almost entirely ignored. This favourable position was, however, only available for people and villages who declared themselves “indigenous” and showed this in their use of language (for the SIL), in economic communal labour (for Velasco’s SINAMOS land titles), in being very knowledgeable (for anthropologists), and in the practice of preferably mystical or spiritual, “primitive”, spectacular, and impressing events for the tourists — the more “indigenous”, the better.

In a series of publications,<sup>9</sup> my wife and I have shown which elements of today’s “Shipibo culture” (in singular) may be traced back in the past and

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

9 See BRABEC DE MORI AND MORI SILVANO DE BRABEC 2009a, 2009b, and BRABEC DE MORI 2007, BRABEC DE MORI 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, and forthcoming).

history of the fluvial Pano of Ucayali (in plural), and which elements can be understood as individual creations (in plural), but are presented as “the original tradition of Shipibo people” (in singular).

It appears that there are many items changing, being lost, and being created, although meanwhile, the illusion of “the original tradition of Shipibo people” is maintained (by missionaries, Indians, researchers, and tourists) in a surprisingly consistent mutual agreement. Everybody wins, if the “tradition” is as modern as possible, but still reaches into the past via “grandparents who already sang like this”, “authentic or original traditions of our people”, “elements of a millennial culture”, and renderings like these, which are reported by the indigenous people themselves. Especially in San Francisco de Yarinacocha, a sort of unofficial “school” has emerged, where people train to make money with the visitors: they are “chamanes”, “artesanans”, “artistas”, or, in the most promising cases, a combination of all.<sup>10</sup>

These changes include, though not exclusively, the following:

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

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

<sup>10</sup> The Shipibo *ayawaska*-using specialists were mostly male, until, in recent years, a “gender mainstreaming” (probably triggered by the tourist’s preferences) has taken place, and female *ayahusqueros* have emerged. However, all *ayahusqueros* would call themselves *médicos* within an indigenous context. If they call themselves *chamanes*, this is a secure indicator that they aim towards Western visitors. Further on, the distinction between *artesanans* and *artists* is very interesting (cf. BRABEC DE MORI AND MORI SILVANO DE BRABEC 2009a): female *artesanans* produce handicrafts, with a medium size embroidered sheet sold at around 35 US dollars (2008 price), while male painters produce art paintings sold at around 350 US dollars each, although labour, material, and the invested creativity are comparably the same. This distinction between “high art” and “low-level handicraft” is a recent western import (art painters were absent among Shipibo before around 2000) and sheds a doubtful light on the assumed equity of gender in Western society.

c) The *kené* designs were adapted to market strategies and therefore simplified and standardized (cf. LATHRAP 1976). The questions of researchers about possible “meanings” of the designs were reflected and many Shipibo-Konibo started to come up with answers to such questions.

d) The songs performed in *ayawaska* sessions were connected to *kené* designs answering Gebhart-Sayer’s questions. Herlinda Agustín<sup>11</sup> from San Francisco de Yarinacocha had worked with Gebhart-Sayer and is now the most prominent protagonist in “healing patterns” (cf. MARTIN 2005).

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

## ≡ 6. Tradition and the structure of time

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

There are many indications, that the structure of time in indigenous societies does not necessarily follow the linear nor the circular idea of *advancing* time. In Shipibo Society, for example, the so-called “mythical past” can be viewed much better as a “distant present” (see e.g. ILLIUS 1999: 128, BRABEC DE MORI 2011a: 182–184). Synchronicity is a very important aspect in Shipibo healing and witchcraft practice, and through the analysis of curing songs, many “synchronicisms” can be observed.

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

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11 Herlinda Agustín died in early 2012. Her legacy, the actual production of healing patterns and desing songs, however, is being carried on by family members and others.

A certain conflict emerges from the translation of e.g. *moatian ipaokani* in Shipibo-Konibo into Spanish and other European languages. This term would be interpreted as “as they lived/acted in mythical past” in orthodox understanding, but it transports much more a meaning like “because this happens in a remote place, it effects what we know or do here”. *Moatian ipaokani* cannot be translated anyway.<sup>12</sup>

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

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

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

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

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