

## ARTICLES

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### Shamanism and Its Discontents

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*Shamanistic healing is often represented in the anthropological literature as a dyadic transactional process in which the shaman helps the patient find meaning in the face of the disordering impact of an illness. A close textual analysis of a curing session among the Aguaruna Jivaro of Peru reveals that the experience created through the ritual is markedly polyphonic rather than dyadic, the clients subtly vying with the shaman to shape the session's discursive contours. While generating a highly charged atmosphere, the event's fusion of political and medical themes betrays the contradictions inherent in a belief system in which shamanism and sorcery are inescapably linked. While there may be a degree of symbolic closure in the session itself, the shaman's revelations only shift disorder from the body human to the body politic.*

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Like depictions of the Roman god Janus, the anthropological image of shamanism has two opposed faces. The first portrays shamans as charismatic protectors of traditional values, helping their clients to maintain structures of meaning or to construct new ones appropriate to changing circumstances. The second face, more rarely documented, is admirably captured in Christopher Crocker's characterization of Bororo shamans as "ambiguous, suspicious personages . . . socially approved if fundamentally distrusted" (Crocker 1985:237).

Perhaps the most influential investigation of shamanism's heroic face is Lévi-Strauss's analysis of a Cuna Indian chant performed for women experiencing protracted labor (1963). Through a series of comparisons with contemporary psychoanalysis, Lévi-Strauss shows how symbols, skillfully manipulated by the shaman, effect important changes in the patient—changes that, he concludes, are ultimately experienced at the somatic level. The shaman mobilizes a profound but largely tacit knowledge of the society's collective representations to craft the appropriate "myth" that will rebuild the shattered experience of the patient into a sheltering architecture of significance.

Yet the shamanism of Lévi-Strauss's analysis is curiously asocial. The patients themselves appear only as passive participants, the shaman's assessment as unquestioned orthodoxy. When the analytical perspective situates shamanism in

its social and political space, a more troubled image tends to emerge (e.g., Atkinson 1987; Steedly 1988; Taussig 1987). One sees that the stories shamans weave exert only a provisional, contested control over their patients' understanding. The shaman's power is granted grudgingly by society; shamanic revelation may be subject to challenge by those who both need and fear it.

Through a textual analysis of rhetoric and counter-rhetoric in an Aguaruna Indian healing session, this article assesses shamanism's second face in an Amazonian setting. My general goal is to lift the veil of romanticism from the session so that it can be seen in a way that more closely resembles the participants' view of it: as a highly charged event involving elements of struggle, uncertainty, ambivalence, and partial revelation. If there is a "social myth" enacted in the ritual, it is a collective and interactive one, not simply the invention of an autonomous ritual specialist (cf. Joralemon 1986). And that "myth" may only replace one type of chaos with another. At its heart, the Aguaruna healing session is the kind of encounter that Foucault calls an "agonism," that is, "a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation" (1982:222).

### **Aguaruna Shamanism in the Alto Río Mayo, Peru**

Like most Amazonian natives of the late 20th century, the Aguaruna of Peru are part of a local cultural mosaic that includes other tribal groups, recently arrived peasant farmers, and the usual host of entrepreneurs and swindlers drawn to regions on the margins of civil control. The Aguaruna negotiate a place for themselves in this social arena by defending their land rights and by responding cannily to sudden shifts in economic conditions. In the Alto Mayo valley, Aguaruna communities are now integrated into the local system of cash-crop agriculture. Yet despite economic transformation, the proselytizing efforts of Protestant missionaries, and the impact of primary education, the Aguaruna maintain a strong cultural identity—an identity reflected, among other ways, in the continued vitality of shamanic practice and its dark alter ego, sorcery beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

The key features of Aguaruna shamanism are typical of the native societies of Western Amazonia. Shamans (*iwishín*) are men who have acquired the ability to communicate directly with powerful beings during visions induced by psychoactive plants.<sup>2</sup> When serious illness strikes, people suspect that sorcery is behind it. Sorcerers (*túnchi* or *wáwek*) may secretly introduce tiny darts into the bodies of their victims, darts that fester and produce illness. By drinking an infusion of the hallucinogens *datém* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and *yáji* (*B. cabrerana*) (referred to as *yáji* when mixed together), a shaman enters a trance that he uses to search the patient's body for such darts, which can sometimes be removed by fanning and sucking. While in this altered state, the shaman may also bear witness to distant events and combat the community's hidden adversaries. Ordinarily, the patients themselves do not take hallucinogens during healing sessions, though many have had experience with psychoactive plants in other contexts.

The sociological implications of shamanism are, of course, much more tangled than this simple good-against-evil description would suggest. For a number of reasons, it is dangerous to be an *iwishín*. First, shamanic practice necessitates regular use of hallucinogens. In the throes of a healing vision, the shaman is vul-

nerable to attack by sorcerers and their spirit familiars. But the immediate threats to the shaman's life are more prosaic. Because the shaman can identify sorcerers—people who may be marked for death because of this accusation—he inevitably has enemies. More important, because all shamans are themselves potential sorcerers, possessing the ability to kill if they so desire, they are prime suspects when there are deaths suggestive of sorcery. Indeed, the good name of a shaman is always contextual: his skills are extolled by close kinsmen but cited as evidence of his homicidal propensities by non-kin.

It is a commonplace to note the equivocal political status of shamans in Amazonian systems of social control, especially among Jivaroan peoples, and I have little to add to existing accounts (e.g., Colajanni 1984; Descola and Lory 1982; Harner 1972; Seymour-Smith 1982). What has not been explored in detail, however, is the extent to which even a shaman's close kinsmen and allies are uncomfortable in the presence of his powers. In the Alto Río Mayo, if one poses the question, "Do you have an *iwishín* in your community?" the reply is likely to be: "No, we get along well here. We have no problems." The most recent expression of local attitudes toward shamans was an attempt by an inter-village organization, the Organización Aguaruna del Alto Mayo (OAAM), to establish an official list of fees for the services of "traditional doctors" and to require all *iwishín* to seek formal recognition from the organization (OAAM 1984). An informant close to OAAM leaders reported that there was also some discussion about the advisability of imposing a tax on practicing *iwishín*, though as of 1986 such a policy had not yet been implemented. The intent of the proposal, according to the people I spoke with, was to force all shamans to identify themselves, thereby bringing their power into the public eye so that it could be more easily observed and controlled. All the evidence at my disposal suggests that this ambivalence toward *iwishín* has been part of Aguaruna social reality for decades and cannot be attributed to rapid culture change.

In view of the dangers of the role and its dubious social status, why would anyone become a shaman? The shamans to whom I spoke emphasized their desire to assist afflicted kinsmen. It bears mentioning, however, that the rapid settlement of the Alto Mayo has opened new economic opportunities for enterprising healers. Local peasant farmers, who associate the Aguaruna with the powerful and shadowy spirits of the forest, are willing to pay substantial fees for the ministrations of a sympathetic *iwishín*. Factors of individual temperament—including curiosity about the spirit world, a desire for influence in one's community, and an ability to endure or even enjoy the perils of frequent intoxication by powerful hallucinogens—also undoubtedly attract certain people to the shaman's role.

Late in 1977, I took up residence in the community where the most active shaman in the Alto Mayo resided. The local preeminence of this *iwishín*, whom I shall call Yankush, rested in part on the belief that he had acquired some of his shamanic powers among Spanish-speaking mestizos of the Peruvian coast. Far from being an assiduous guardian of cultural tradition, he had introduced a number of idiosyncratic methods into his practice, including the abbreviation of the traditional healing session<sup>3</sup> and the occasional use of alcohol to help him arrive at a trance state. He had also integrated the prescription of pharmaceutical products into his healing performances. Highly regarded by mestizo colonists, he was sometimes referred to as "Professor Yankush." His fame among colonists

seemed to raise rather than lower his standing among the Aguaruna. It is Yankush who presides over the session that is the focus of this article.

### Healing Session, 18 January 1978

The session begins after sunset, for the *iwishín* needs absolute darkness to be able to find the sorcerer's darts in his patients. As night falls and the patients and other interested parties assemble in his house, Yankush drinks the hallucinogenic preparation, *yáji*. After a time, he begins to yawn in a curious, exaggerated fashion. This signals that the hallucinogen has taken effect: powerful beings called *pásuk* are entering the shaman's chest to assist him in his curing acts. Yankush's utterances encompass several distinctive styles or, as I shall call them, "registers": (1) a normal discursive register consisting of simple declarative statements; (2) a normal shamanic register, performed as song, which includes divinatory and metaphorical statements presented in a compressed style still intelligible to other participants; and (3) a cryptic shamanic register, also sung, employing an esoteric lexicon.<sup>4</sup> The cryptic register resembles Cuna healing chants (Sherzer 1983:134) in that its specific meaning is opaque to laymen, though they do have a general notion of the register's content. In the following text, both shamanic registers are marked in bold type.<sup>5</sup>

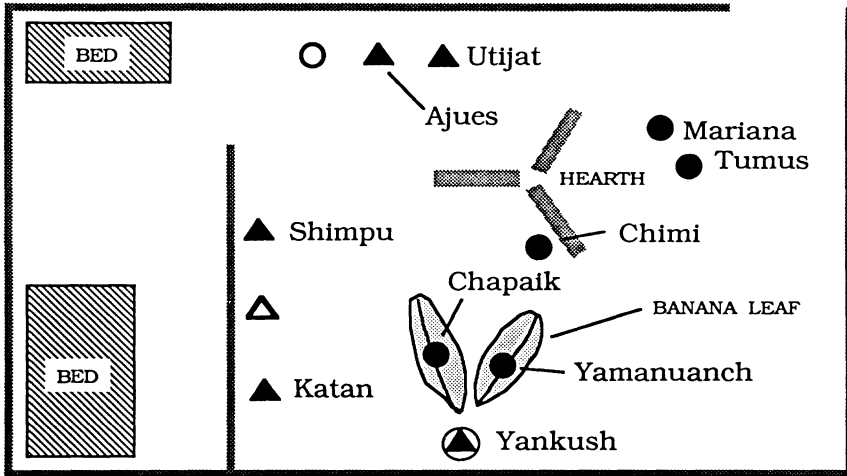
The performance also includes the energetic participation of the patients' kinsmen, who shout words of encouragement to Yankush, move his divinatory pronouncements in certain directions with their questions, and make their own strong declarations when their fears of sorcery are confirmed. So polyphonic is the texture of the session that I was unable to transcribe all of the comments, questions, jokes, and cries of dismay uttered during the two-hour event. There was simply too much going on. The following text focuses principally on the utterances of Yankush and his two main interlocutors, the husbands of the patients.

#### *Participants*

A group of people have arrived from another village in the Alto Mayo valley that is approximately a day's travel away. The group includes two couples: Chapaik and her husband Katan, and Yamanuanch and her husband Shimpu (all pseudonyms). They have prevailed upon Yankush to take *yáji* in order to diagnose the illnesses that have afflicted both Chapaik and Yamanuanch. Neither woman is seriously ill, but both complain of chronic pains of various sorts. Yankush's wife, Tumus, is also slightly unwell, and she receives treatment at the end of the session as the patients and their families file out of the house. Because no one is dangerously ill, the overall atmosphere of the healing session is intense but genial. Several other residents of Yankush's community are also present, including two anthropologists, Margaret Van Bolt and the author. With the exception of the anthropologists, all of those who participate consider themselves to be kin, though the two patients and their husbands are only distant relatives of Yankush (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>

#### *The Event*

At about 7:00 p.m., the anthropologists arrive at Yankush's house with Utijat and Chimi, close kinsmen of Yankush who reside in the community.



**Key to participants**

Yankush= Shaman

Yamanuanch } Patients  
Chapaik }

Katan= Chapaik's husband  
Shimpu= Yamanuanch's husband

△ } Anthropologists  
○ }

Mariana } Observers  
Tumus }  
Ajues }  
Chimi }  
Utijat }

**Figure 1**  
*Adults present at shamanic healing session, 18 January 1978.*

Yankush has taken the *yáji* and is resting in the bedroom. He gets up and ambles out to chat. Katan, Chapaik, Shimpu, and Yamanuanch arrive. At about 7:30, Yankush goes out, saying he will defecate. People chat informally. He returns and sits on a stool with his back to the room. He whistles, holding a fan of *sámpi* leaves. He sings softly, then talks informally with people, still facing the wall. He yawns in a drawn-out fashion, indicating that *pásuk* are entering his body. He begins to shake the fan. He takes off his sweater, then combs his hair, still facing away from the participants.

YANKUSH: “**I, I, I, I, I. With Tsunki** [spirit being of aquatic realm and ultimate source of shamanistic power] **I am seated.**” He falls silent. He spits, then shakes his fan while breaking into wordless song. He stands up, still facing the wall.

- 5 KATAN, shouting: “Let’s listen! He’s intoxicated now, so let’s listen!” Yankush sits down again, still singing. His daughter brings him a small bottle of an unidentified liquid. He rubs this liquid on his neck.  
KATAN: “Sing to your own body so that others won’t bewitch you.”

- UTIJAT: "Others know you are curing. They can hurt you. Be careful!"
- 10 Yankush faces participants. Katan brings in two large banana leaves. Shimpu moves the lantern to put Yankush in shadow.
- YANKUSH (to Katan): "Mother's brother, bring your wife." Both patients come forward and sit in front of Yankush. They take off their dresses but remain covered with blankets below the waist. One woman turns over to lie
- 15 on her stomach.
- KATAN: "Take the darts out. See where the sickness is!"
- SHIMPU (indicating Yamanuanch): "She can't eat. Her throat hurts."
- UTIJAT: "Think powerfully!" Yankush looks at Chapaik, sucks on her back, and spits. He drinks from a bottle (later identified as *kistián ámpi*,
- 20 "mestizo medicine"), faces toward wall, and vomits.
- KATAN: "If you can't cure her, tell me the truth. Throw it [the sorcery substance] out! . . . Look, stand up to the intoxication. If you cure her, I'll always receive you well in my house. Throw it [sorcery substance] away!"
- Yankush turns to face Yamanuanch. Shimpu and others begin to shout.
- 25 VARIOUS: "Show him where it hurts!" Yankush appears to suck on chest of Yamanuanch.
- YAMANUANCH: "My throat hurts too."
- YANKUSH: "You'll get well." Yankush takes off his shirt, facing the wall again. He turns to look at Yamanuanch.
- 30 KATAN: "Sit well, think well!"
- YANKUSH (shaking fan in direction of Yamanuanch): "Her chest is bad [i.e., diseased]." He sucks the afflicted spot and spits noisily. He turns quickly to Chapaik.
- VARIOUS MEN: "Tell him where it hurts!"
- 35 YANKUSH: "You can give her an injection."
- KATAN: "Nephew, look at all the places that hurt!"
- YANKUSH: "Give her an injection. She will recover. She is not sick with sorcery, but a cold in her throat." He looks at Chapaik while singing, touching her with his left hand. He sucks on Chapaik's back, spits, then sings
- 40 above Chapaik. He yawns noisily, then kneels to suck on her back. He hawks noisily and spits.
- YANKUSH: "You can give her an injection of *wichu* [unidentified; probably a corruption of the name of a pharmaceutical product]. You can give her three injections. She will get well."
- 45 KATAN: "Tomorrow I'll get the medicine."
- YANKUSH: "**With various injections she'll get better.**" Turns to Yamanuanch. "She has sickness in her stomach."
- SHIMPU: "Is she going to die? If so, tell me!" Yankush leans over Yamanuanch, sucks, and spits.
- 50 KATAN: "Why would they want to bewitch me? I always give people food when they come to visit. Why bewitch my wife? I'm angry." Yankush stands singing over Yamanuanch. He drinks from the bottle of "mestizo medicine." He sings over Yamanuanch for several minutes: "**If my enemies want to bewitch me, here I am. They can't hurt me. I see every-**
- 55 **thing. She had darts in her stomach, and I took them out.**"
- UTIJAT: "See well in order to cure!"

YANKUSH: “Your throat is sore from vomiting. I will heal you. Your stomach hurts right there. I’ll heal it. When I first began curing, few people came. Now many come because I can cure. If they are weak, I can heal them. If they have rheumatism, I can cure them. You will return to your house. I see your soul dancing there, getting drunk at parties. Perhaps you’ve been given an injection. This makes your stomach hurt. There are a few darts there.”

CHIMI: “If there are any darts there when she gets back home, they may say that Yankush put them there. So take them all out!”

KATAN: “There are no sorcerers there [in the patient’s community]. Who will have done this bewitching? If my wife dies, I could kill any man out of anger. Little nephew, cure my wife well. I don’t want to be bothering you here. I live far away.”

AJUES: “Why hasn’t Uyum [a kinsman in a distant community] come? Is he making war?” (Here Ajues is calling on the shaman’s visionary powers to see events in a distant location.)

YANKUSH: “Did your wife ever have colic [*kúliku*] before?”

SHIMPU: “No, never.”

75 YANKUSH: “Now colic wants to grab her. You can give her ten drops of a medicine for colic . . . [still singing over Yamanuanch]. **Colic wants to grab her. Her body is weak, sick.**” He sucks noisily, spits. “Colic does not heal quickly. It gets better, then comes again. I will cure it completely. In this part [indicating throat?] there is no sickness. You vomited so much that a piece of a sorcery dart is stuck in your throat. I’ll remove it.” He sucks on her throat and spits. “**How have you been bewitched? Sometimes it is done so that a person will be sick for years but not die. I can cure this. If you have a piece of dart in your throat, the vomiting has made it more painful. I can take it out.**” (Speaking now) “Before you had much sorcery inside you. Now I’m taking it all out. You are better. Receive an injection, and you’ll get better.” He sucks and spits.

UTIJAT: “Make her well! You are a good curer.”

YANKUSH: “I’ll see everything. Nothing will remain.”

90 KATAN: “If she has a lot of illness and you can’t take all of it out, take out half so that I can cure her easily with medicine. You are a curer, you can do this for me.” Yankush sucks on Chapaik and spits. He yawns loudly, and looks at Chapaik.

YANKUSH: “**In Achu they killed a person.** A sorcerer was killed.”

OTHERS: “Who could it be?” Yankush drinks from the bottle of “mestizo medicine,” then puts it down on the floor. He looks at Chapaik, touching her with his left hand. He sucks, spits, then vomits.

KATAN: “Cure well! You are a shaman!”

YANKUSH: “When I’m intoxicated, I cure well. Don’t say that I wasn’t intoxicated enough.”

100 KATAN: “There are others who are not as brave as I” (alluding to his anger if his wife dies of sorcery).

YANKUSH: “**On a piece of iron I walk on tiptoes . . .**” (rest of segment of curing song is inaudible).

- KATAN: "Cure well! Don't let her be sick!" Yankush stands over Chapaik, fanning her with his leaf-fan. He touches her back with his left hand. He sucks and spits noisily, then begins to sing. (Segment is indecipherable on tape.)
- KATAN: "Blow the sickness away!" (To Chapaik) "You said that your head and neck hurt. Tell him where so that he will cure you."
- 110 YANKUSH (turning to Yamanuanch, shaking his leaf-fan): "**If she has illness, I will see it and take it out.**" He sucks on Yamanuanch's stomach and spits. "She can't die. I will heal her."
- KATAN: "She can't die, because I have few family left. We will be few if she dies."
- 115 YANKUSH: "Tumus [Yankush's wife] is sick [with natural illness], not bewitched."
- UTIJAT: "Once I was sick like that, but after taking medicine I got well. I almost died."
- UTIJAT and KATAN: "Fan her! Blow the sickness away!"
- 120 YANKUSH: "Her stomach is stuck together inside. I'm going to loosen it. **I'll take out the sickness.**" Sucks, spits. "**Sickness has hit several times, but I've removed it so that it will heal.**" He begins to sing, facing the wall behind his stool.
- KATAN: "You all, don't talk so much! If you speak, the healer won't be able to see. Be quiet, or he'll make a mistake!"
- 125 YANKUSH: "There is a war in another place and they've killed someone. His kinsmen return crying." He faces Yamanuanch and begins to sing. "**This person is weak inside. I'll make her well and strong. The earth never dies. When I heal her, she will be the same, never dying.** You are well. You lack only a little treatment to be completely healed. I'm taking out the darts. Afterwards you should have an injection, but you will recover slowly. Take off your blanket so that I can see your chest. Stains or wounds come out on your breast. Have you had this before?"
- 130 YAMANUANCH: "Yes."
- 135 YANKUSH: "Can you give her an injection?"
- SHIMPU: "Yes, I can."
- UTIJAT: "See how the birth of the woman's child will be."
- YANKUSH: "I can't see that." To the patient: "I'll return to you again." (Turns to Chapaik.)
- 140 UTIJAT: "Look at me to see if I should take the name 'Tobacco'." (People laugh because Utijat is known in the village by several humorous nicknames, some of which he invented for himself.)
- KATAN: "Look there! She says that her liver hurts. Show him where it hurts. In her stomach it is hard. There's a line of pain there. Look there first, look where the *yáji* tells you. Her chest is tight. It won't let her breathe."
- 145 Yankush sucks on Chapaik's stomach, then spits. Those present remark that there is much *kaag* (the sorcerer's special saliva) in the saliva that Yankush spits out.
- KATAN: "It's understandable that a stranger might want to fight with me, but why bewitch my wife? Yankush says that there is something in her body. Since he has strength, he should look carefully and blow away the
- 150



- sickness.” To Yankush: “If there’s only a little, take it out. If there is sickness, see it. Look to see what will cure her as fast as possible. Cure it! Cure it! See what will happen next! This woman came far to be cured. Some women don’t want to live, and they take their own lives with poison. She doesn’t want to die. Who can cure her? Look at them [i.e., the patients]. Many come here and leave recovered. Sometimes shamans can’t see. But look carefully anyway! Look!”
- 155 UTIJAT: “Look to see if my soul is married to a mestizo woman!” (laughter)
- 160 KATAN: “Show him where it hurts in your liver.”  
 YANKUSH: “She could get well fast, but the ‘tobacco’ [i.e., curer] hasn’t discovered the sickness yet. Her body is weak.”  
 KATAN: “Now that you are with *yáji*, look well! Throw out the sickness!”
- 165 UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: “She says she has *tsúak* [a powerful hallucinogen, *Brugmansia* sp., sometimes used for self-cures]. Can she take it?”  
 YANKUSH: “You can take two injections, then you can take *tsúak*.”  
 KATAN: “After looking into her, you should tell us what medicine to buy.”
- 170 YANKUSH (indicating Chapaik): “She doesn’t have much, just a little sickness.”  
 KATAN: “Can I give her injections for her liver?”  
 YANKUSH: “Yes, that’s all right.” To Chapaik: “Mother, I’ll fan you. **I’m concentrating to throw out sickness, like a tireless jaguar. My song continues, continues. With my help she will become like the tapir, which doesn’t know how to refuse any kind of food.**”
- 175 KATAN: “It’s true that tapirs never reject food. When I eat tapir it tastes good. Delicious!” (Tapir is traditionally a prohibited food item for the Aguaruna, though it is now increasingly eaten in the Alto Mayo because game is scarce.)
- 180 YANKUSH: “When she gets well she can eat the monkey *wájam*. The pains in your stomach have made you weak. But with this fanning you will get better. We’ll see how it will turn out. **I speak to you like the *mankúp*** [species of bear], **which never gets sick.**”
- 185 KATAN: “Tell him if you don’t have pains in your head. Little nephew, she says that her head seems to swell, then her ears close up tight.”  
 YANKUSH: “From here in her head I took out darts and threw them away. Tomorrow I will see all, and then we can leave this curing.”  
 CHAPAIK (getting up): “I want you to see into me again on Saturday, and when I come again.”
- 190 YANKUSH: “When you come again, bring me a gift of cloth. With another healing session you will recover.”  
 YAMANUANCH: “What kind of injection should I get?”  
 YANKUSH: “An injection for colic. You can take drops of Diafa [apparently a commercial medicine] in water several times. You can take drops of Diafa without an injection. This is the only sickness that is hurting you.”  
 To Shimpu: “There was something sticky in her body, but I took it all out. Only a little colic remains there. She’ll get well soon. This colic made her body weak.”

SHIMPU: “Can she eat *wájiam* [a species of monkey]?”

YANKUSH: “She can eat it when she’s better, after a week. **Through her body I say the sickness will not continue. The agile dog never tires, hopping about. She should be this way. I say that her stomach should never reject food, as the tapir never rejects food.** It’s all right. She won’t die. It’s nothing.”

KATAN: “How are the grandchildren I left behind in Shimpiyacu?”

YANKUSH: “All right. They’re fine.”

KATAN: “Will I arrive home safely?”

YANKUSH: “Yes. Don’t worry any more.” Mariana helps Tumus lie down in front of Yankush. Others are saying goodbye and leaving.

MARIANA: “Tell him to fan your head. Lie down. Show him where your liver hurts most.”

YANKUSH: “**She has *súgku*.** [In this context, *súgku* means “natural” or “epidemic” illness as opposed to sorcery-induced illness.] **After much suffering, she’ll get better.**”

OTHERS: “Surely she will die of suffering!”

YANKUSH: “Her other sickness is gone. Now another illness has grabbed her, the same that infected the others. **The offspring of the tapir never becomes ill. Be like this.**” Chimi and Utijat take their leave. All the others have left except Yankush, his wife Tumus, and Tumus’s mother Mariana. The anthropologists leave. It is 9:05 p.m.

### First Reading: Shamanic Clarification and Transference

To gain some analytical purchase on an event of this complexity, we must identify the central features of the session and follow the developing roles of the protagonists. In doing so, I shall first offer a conventional interpretation of Yankush’s therapeutic efforts, one that stresses his attempts to grapple with the chaotic effects of illness and wrest from them some meaning so as to assure the patients that their sufferings will soon come to an end. I shall then advance a second reading of this event that challenges the first by questioning the alleged order created through healing discourse.

The central acts pondered by the participants in this encounter have to do with “seeing” as it is effected through the powerful agency of the shaman’s gaze. The participants repeatedly urge Yankush to “see where the sickness is” (line 16). In response, Yankush reassures them that he can “see everything” (line 54). Later he describes Yamanuanch’s illness as resembling “wounds or stains” on her chest (line 132). Yankush’s gaze encompasses not only the ability to see the hidden danger in his patients but also to observe events distant in space and time, including violent acts in other communities (lines 93 and 126). Though not realized in this session, the ultimate achievement of the shamanic gaze is the identification of the sorcerer who sends the illness. Thus Yankush’s power lies in his ability to search the darkness for the glimmer of hidden forces and veiled motives. His manifest ability to see the illness inside his patients is enhanced by the darkness; paradoxically, the shaman’s penetrating gaze is most effective when others cannot see at all.

According to the ideology of Aguaruna shamanic practice, the acuity of the shaman’s gaze is based on two factors: (1) the quantity and strength of the *yáji*

that he has consumed before the session, and (2) the presence in his body of the very *tséntsak* (spirit-darts) that he seeks within his patients. Throughout the session, Yankush emphasizes the intensity of his hallucinogen-induced vision. He declares, for instance, “Don’t say that I wasn’t intoxicated enough,” which is presaged by Katan’s imperative “Stand up to the intoxication” earlier in the event. The bitter *yáji* enables him to do his dangerous work, but his willingness to submit to its rigors is also keenly noted evidence of his commitment as a healer. Ultimately, however, even the power of *yáji* as the catalyst of the shamanic gaze depends upon the strength of the shaman’s own spirit-darts: the Alto Mayo Aguaruna assert that *yáji* will not intoxicate someone who lacks them. In other words, the shaman’s spirit-darts give the vision form and meaning, permitting him to neutralize the venomous *tséntsak* lodged in his patient’s body.<sup>7</sup>

Although the central discursive focus of the healing session concerns sight, the principal channels of communication are almost exclusively auditory because of the enfolding darkness. There is, of course, a tactile dimension while Yankush works on the bodies of the patients, but in essence he translates a visual experience into an acoustic one. He employs the three speech registers mentioned earlier; he also whistles, hums, shakes his fan of *sámpi* leaves, yawns extravagantly, noisily sucks on the patients, and is periodically convulsed by paroxysms of hawking, spitting, and vomiting.

As a speech event, the ritual can be roughly divided into four parts.

(1) The session opens with Yankush and the participants talking informally in the ordinary discursive register. As the hallucinogen begins to take effect, however, the shaman’s messages change registers and expand into other communicative “channels” and “codes” (Fitzgerald 1975:208–209): his explosive yawns herald the arrival of the *pásuk* spirits; he shakes the leaf-fan; conspicuous spitting commences; he begins to sing rather than speak. Katan and other men shout words of encouragement.

(2) By the time curing begins in earnest (beginning approximately at line 18), Yankush’s actions shift to sucking, utterances in the shamanic register, and retching.

(3) Beginning at line 93, the exchanges of Yankush and the other participants jump from the particulars of the cases at hand to events in distant places: the murder of a sorcerer in Achu and a violent encounter in an unidentified community.

(4) As the session enters its final exchanges (from line 161), Yankush moves gradually back to ordinary speech as he and the patients’ families work out a schedule for additional sessions and plan the dietary and medicinal regime that will hasten recovery.

What does this nervous movement between registers mean, and why should Yankush’s communications expand into other channels during the session? At the most superficial level, the unusual sounds and shifting registers mark the event’s “otherness” for the participants, for they are indices of Yankush’s entry into an altered state of consciousness and his struggle against the evil work of sorcerers. The various forms of communication also show considerable redundancy of coding (Fitzgerald 1975:228) that serves to emphasize the event’s key symbols. The noise of fanning or energetic sucking, for example, reinforces the repeated references to the extraction of spirit-darts.

Yankush's utterances mark the transference held to be central to all symbolic healing (Dow 1986). The patient's struggle is taken on by the healer, who attempts to define and resolve the issues at hand and to restore the patient to some form of wholeness. In the case before us, the shaman removes the sources of pain, neutralizes their harmful power, and assimilates them into his own shamanic substance. As Lévi-Strauss notes, in the therapeutic transference sought by the shaman "the manipulation must be carried out through symbols, that is, through meaningful equivalents of things meant which belong to another order of reality" (1963:196). Here the patient's experience of suffering constitutes a disordered whole involving different aspects of bodily function. During the ritual, a complex bodily experience is transformed into an intricate auditory experience which, through the extraction of spirit-darts, eventually becomes focused and simplified. Healing symbols, like religious metaphors, "recast the inchoate (and ineffable) whole of primary experience into various manageable domains" (Fernandez 1977:126).

Although the level of mythic detail elucidated by Lévi-Strauss in his analysis of a Cuna ritual is not to be found in the Aguaruna rite, Yankush does employ figurative language to suggest to his patients that he has removed the source of their illness and put them on the path to recovery. "You will return to your house. I see your soul dancing there, getting drunk at parties . . ." he sings (lines 61–62). And later Yankush makes ample use of tropes to weave his fabric of healing images: "The earth never dies. When I heal her, she will be the same, never dying [lines 128–129]. . . . The agile dog never tires, hopping about. She should be this way. I say that her stomach should never reject food, as the tapir never rejects food" (lines 222–224).

Beginning with line 178, Yankush employs a series of animal similes, some of which are picked up for discussion by Katan. Yankush claims to concentrate "like a tireless jaguar" to make Chapaik "become like a tapir, which doesn't know how to refuse any kind of food." Presently there is a discussion of permitted food items for the patient—specifically, whether Chapaik can safely eat the flesh of *wájiam*, a species of monkey. This exchange is representative of a broader pattern of interest in the links between humans and animals prominent in Aguaruna health care practices. The treatment of most identifiable illness includes a set of appropriate food avoidances or prohibitions, called *wakemtái*, that are linked to the illness symptoms by analogical reasoning. People suffering from skin lesions, for instance, should avoid eating armadillo "because the lesions will then dig into the flesh as the armadillo claws into the ground." Analogies to the animal world can be used therapeutically as well. In a special healing chant for infants, the sick child may be likened to the offspring of vultures, "which can eat rotten things without harm." The goal is to transfer the resistance of the vulture's chicks to the suffering child.<sup>8</sup> Yankush's statements, then, draw on a shared etiological and therapeutic framework that extends beyond the special case of sorcery.

The drama of Yankush's multi-channel communication is intensified by the contribution of Katan and Shimpu, who shout words of encouragement, urge the healer to protect himself against the dangers he willingly incurs on their behalf, emphatically declare their concern for their wives, and direct his visionary powers in ways that are of interest to the gathered participants. The weighty exchanges between Yankush and these men are leavened on two occasions by the humor of

Utijat (lines 140 and 159), who is known in the community for his idiosyncratic wit.

Although the patients themselves are passive throughout most of the session, one can reasonably suppose the event helps them to redefine themselves as “healed” or at least moving toward recovery. Yankush repeatedly says that he has taken much of the sickness from their bodies and that they will soon feel better. Besides providing them with provisional explanations for their ailments, Yankush also suggests specific therapeutic measures that include recommendations for diet and commercial pharmaceuticals, as well as the use of the hallucinogen *tsúak* to obtain healing visions (cf. Brown 1978). Moreover, the patients have been the objects of intense expressions of concern by the session’s participants. Chapaik’s brisk remarks near the end of the ritual (“I want you to see into me again on Saturday”) imply that she is satisfied with his efforts, though hardly in awe of his powers.

### Second Reading: Dissident Subtexts

Having developed a rather orthodox symbolic interpretation of the healing session, I wish to advance another interpretation of the session’s exchanges, one that illuminates the subtle negotiations between Yankush and his clients, especially Katan, who plays a prominent part in the proceedings. Katan’s initial contributions to the ritual take the form of shouts of encouragement (e.g., line 30, “Sit well, think well!”) and blandishments (lines 22–23, “If you cure her, I’ll always receive you well in my house”). His mood changes to indignation, however, as he contemplates the possibility that his wife is the victim of sorcery: “Why would they want to bewitch me? I always give people food when they come to visit. Why bewitch my wife? I’m angry” (lines 50–51). But it is Chimi’s subsequent remark that offers a clue to the subversive undercurrents. “If there are any darts there when she gets home,” she shouts (lines 64–65), “they may say that Yankush put them there. So take them all out!”

Chimi’s remark is an unusually frank rendering of a threat implicit in all Aguaruna healing sessions. The nature of shamanic power is believed to invite malfeasance on the part of the healer. People see that he can heal; they suspect that he can also kill. A demonstration of a shaman’s commitment to healing (as opposed to killing) is his willingness to take on patients, the intensity with which he works on them during the healing session, and their subsequent recovery. If he declines to treat people, if he proves reluctant to work hard at healing, if too many patients die, troubling questions may arise. Is the shaman really a sorcerer? Is he taking advantage of his credulous clients to pursue sorcery under the guise of healing?<sup>9</sup>

So Yankush is under pressure to demonstrate his efficacy and good will by a thorough treatment of the two patients. On the heels of Chimi’s comment, Katan interjects: “Who will have done this bewitching? If my wife dies, I could kill any man out of anger” (lines 66–68). This is echoed later by his comment, “There are others who are not as brave as I” (line 100). Katan’s boastful declarations are rhetoric with a purpose. Aguaruna men argue that the best means of protecting one’s family from sorcery is to make direct threats to suspected sorcerers. Katan uses this healing session as a social stage on which he can publicly emphasize his

determination to repay sorcery with violence. Although an event such as this is not public in a strict sense, it will be widely discussed throughout the Alto Mayo in the days to follow. Katan hopes that his show of strength will deter sorcerers from continuing their secret assaults. The declarations are also for Yankush's benefit, should he be tempted to pursue sorcery himself.

Soon after these veiled threats, Yankush divines the killing of a shaman in a neighboring valley, reporting it first in the shamanic register, then discursively (line 93). He immediately refocuses on a patient, entering into a period of noisy sucking and violent retching, after which he comments, "Don't say that I wasn't intoxicated enough" (lines 98–99). These rapid moves between distant political events and the specifics of healing, repeated several times during the session, mark Yankush's trance as significantly different from the classic form of spirit mediumship in which the medium is totally separated from his or her ordinary self, with no subsequent recollection of trance utterances (Lambek 1981:73). The discreteness of the latter form of trance gives the medium the license to speak of forbidden subjects and even to elaborate an "antistructural world" that "challenges the larger society through its creation of new norms that upend conventional morality" (DeBernardi 1987:330).<sup>10</sup>

But the antistructural world of the Aguaruna shaman cannot be a desired social norm; it can only be invoked to defend against the antistructural antagonism of one's enemies. Nor can Yankush deny the authorship of his shamanic powers, despite the assistance of his *pásuk* spirit-helpers. He must therefore tread carefully, stressing his own willingness to heal while distancing himself from the work of sorcerers. In the sequence under scrutiny (lines 93–99), he declares that a sorcerer has been assassinated, thereby validating belief in the existence of sorcerers and in the power of his shamanic gaze. The revelation also implicitly reaffirms the notion that sorcerers can and should be killed. Finally, he emphasizes his own strenuous efforts at curing, which are public signs of his good intentions. These quick rhetorical shifts are representative of his approach to the entire session, which consists of abrupt movements between the shamanic antistructure (constituted by his song) and the demands of his clients, who advance their own agendas whenever they can.

Yankush and his clients thus find themselves caught in a labyrinth of contradiction. By calling on the services of a shaman, the patients and their kinsmen implicitly validate the very system of shamanic power that threatens them. They take some comfort in the fact that Yankush, as the most public of practitioners, pursues his activities in the front regions of society, where he is subject to intense scrutiny. Yet they also use the healing session to make their statement to Yankush and all shamans, in effect saying, "We are strong. We will give no quarter to hidden sorcerers."

For his part, Yankush uses the persuasive power of metaphor and the broad communicative powers of ritual in an attempt to imbue the patients' suffering with a sense of meaning. But to support his precarious status as a shamanic practitioner in the front regions of social life, he must arouse the participants' moral outrage at the work of unknown shamans who work their evil craft in the back regions. This inevitably suggests the possibility that the healing effected through the ceremony is provisional or, worse still, a deadly form of hypocrisy. Aguaruna shamans and their clients are thus locked into an uneasy "dialectic of control" (Gid-

dens 1979:93) in which they constantly renegotiate the terms of their relative autonomy and dependence, even as they reproduce the shamanic system itself.

### Conclusions

My intent has been to lay bare the powerful fusion of psychological and political elements taking place within the crucible of Aguaruna shamanic practice. Much of the discussion during the healing session has an explicit political quality: even when communicating in the shamanic register, Yankush alludes to conflicts and killings, public acts and private motives. The emotional intensity of the event is engendered by the shaman in concert with the other participants, whose outbursts are often quite self-consciously directed to a wider audience. This intricately textured social experience is brought to bear on the physical condition of specific patients but may come to affect the political condition of larger social units in the region.

Both the shaman and his interlocutors make effective use of rhetoric in an attempt to assert their control over the session. Yankush avails himself of an Aristotelian rhetorical form called the *enthymeme*, the manipulation of reasoning based on public opinion (Burke 1950:56), the purpose of which is to persuade the patients of his healing skills and his good intentions. Against the enthymemic rhetoric of Yankush is pitted the more oblique counter-rhetoric of Katan and Chimi, which stresses the power of the community over the sinister schemes of sorcerer-shamans. This exchange elevates the emotional intensity of the encounter, contributing to an atmosphere that the Aguaruna regard as both dangerous and therapeutic.

But does this ritual serve to create, in the words of Fitzgerald (1975:232), “an island of structure in an otherwise rather disorderly social world”? This question can be answered affirmatively only from a synchronic perspective—that is, by ignoring the session’s place in the ongoing history of Yankush, the patients and their kinsmen, and the Alto Río Mayo as a whole. Looked at diachronically, each shamanic performance has an element of incompleteness, for the shaman’s motives and behavior are always subject to public scrutiny. Closure is achieved only at the shaman’s death, if even then. Although the session may help the patients understand the source of their physical discomfort, it also raises and leaves unresolved alarming possibilities. The suspicion that Chapaik and Yamanuanch are troubled by sorcery is now confirmed. But who are the sorcerers? When will they strike again and will it be in a more lethal way? Could Yankush be using his cover as a healing shaman to do them secret harm, perhaps even during the curing session itself? Does a recurrence of illness signify a new episode of sorcery, or does it mean that the shaman’s claims of efficacy are exaggerated? These questions will echo through local politics long after the healing session witnessed here. Although there is a provisional order forged in the ritual, it can never be definitive—for if it were, all sorcerers would be identified and eliminated, all mysterious illnesses banished from the Aguaruna world. The vexing questions raised in the shamanic encounter and the contested nature of shamanic knowledge itself guarantee the social reproduction of the shaman-sorcerer complex.

Yankush’s reputation is built in part on his appropriation of symbols of non-Indian culture, most notably “mestizo medicine” and pharmaceuticals. This in-

tense interest in alien shamanic practices, which has a long-established tradition in Jivaroan societies (Harner 1972:119–125), is usually interpreted as being founded on the belief that the foreign is more powerful than the local. One wonders, though, whether the search for knowledge in distant places represents instead an unconscious impulse to acquire forms of power free of the constraints and counterclaims of local political life—in other words, a wish to escape from the dialectic of control that troubles both the shaman and his clients. In his use of pharmaceuticals Yankush searches for a form of domination that is uncontested. Aguaruna laity express a similar wish when they speak of “eliminating *iwishin* once and for all,” thus ridding society of the threat of sorcery. In both responses we see the implicit acknowledgment that shamanism is more than the ritual enactment of cosmological principles, more than spiritual ideology. It is also a robust instrument of social control, which like all forms of power generates its measure of opposition and discontent.

An analysis that directs itself to the fissures in the social edifice runs the risk of overlooking the ways in which practices contribute to social solidarity (Ortner 1984:157). It cannot be denied that Aguaruna healing rituals provide a focus for kin-group unity and the expression of key cultural values. The cathartic exposure of the hidden sources of illness, accompanied by dramatic demonstrations of concern, puts healing sessions among the strongest expressions of the cohesiveness of the group (however defined) available in Aguaruna society. What I have tried to show here is that this solidarity is achieved at substantial cost—for the participants vanquish illness from the physical body only by shifting the locus of uncertainty to the body politic.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>The particulars of my field research among the Aguaruna of the Alto Río Mayo are described in Brown (1984, 1986). Although my most extensive research was conducted in 1976–78, some of the material presented here was collected during brief visits in 1984, 1985, and 1986. Brown (1984:227–232) includes a complete transcript of another healing session over which Yankush presided.

<sup>2</sup>I recorded one instance of a woman who practiced as an *iwishin*, but her case was considered highly unusual by people in the Alto Mayo. Nor have I found any references to women serving as healing shamans among neighboring Jivaroan societies. Women may, however, be identified as sorcerers, though sorcery accusations against women are infrequent and, to the best of my knowledge, rarely lead to homicide.

<sup>3</sup>I know of no sources that provide transcripts of healing sessions from other Jivaroan populations. Such descriptions as are available, however, do suggest that *iwishin* traditionally worked well into the night when they treated their patients. None of the sessions I witnessed in Yankush’s house lasted more than three hours, and several were substantially shorter.



<sup>4</sup>In their detailed analysis of psychotherapeutic interviews, Labov and Fanshel (1977:35) distinguish among several "fields of discourse" that bear some resemblance to what I have called registers because they demonstrate marked differences in content. Nevertheless, the term "register" (Halliday 1978:35) better expresses the lexical differences between ordinary speech and shamanic utterance, as well as the shift from speech to song.

<sup>5</sup>To obtain the text presented here, I reviewed a tape recording of the healing session with an Aguaruna informant, who helped me transcribe and interpret Yankush's songs and the statements of other participants. Although my relations with Yankush were generally cordial, he declined to assist me in the transcription of his songs, on the grounds that the words were a professional secret. Several passages in the cryptic shamanic register are marked as "untranslatable" or "indecipherable" because lay informants could not understand them. Although I regretted not being able to obtain a complete transcript, these difficulties made me aware that the specific content of much of the shaman's song is unknown to other participants and therefore peripheral to the session as they experience it. Readers interested in complete translations of Jivaroan shamanic chants should consult Pellizzaro (1978).

<sup>6</sup>I have not elaborated on the specific genealogical links among the participants, because they do not seem especially germane to an understanding of the events that follow. The fluid kindred-based groups found among the Aguaruna and other Jivaroans have a developmental cycle that can exert a profound influence on local politics (see Colajanni 1984), but such factors shed little light on the events of this particular ritual.

<sup>7</sup>Pellizzaro (1978) states that for the Shuar, Jivaroan neighbors of the Aguaruna, a curing shaman must have spirit-darts of the same category as the darts he removes from patients. If he attempts to extract a dart of a category previously unknown to him, he can be overpowered and killed.

<sup>8</sup>Details of Aguaruna food prohibitions, healing chants, and the perceived links between humans and animals in Aguaruna ethnomedicine can be found in Brown (1984:174–200, 243–258).

<sup>9</sup>This occupational hazard of shamans is outlined in Colajanni's detailed account of the murder of an Achuar shaman in Ecuador (1984). His informants report that good shamans never refuse to undertake a healing session, nor do they consider bewitching people. Said one man, "I always advised a shaman that he should never bewitch anyone, that he should cure well, that he ought to suck deeply [at curing sessions], and that if he were murdered I would avenge him" (1984:239, my translation). Later in the same essay, Colajanni mentions that suspicions about a specific shaman intensified when he was perceived to have begun to treat his kin negligently with regard to their need for shamanic healing (1984:243).

<sup>10</sup>Lewis (1981) argues persuasively that the distinction between spirit mediumship and shamanism is largely terminological. Because of space limitations I have not undertaken a detailed comparison of the literature on shamans and mediums, but it bears noting that studies of the latter have traditionally been more alert to issues of social power than have works on New World shamanism.

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