

**CULTIVATING SPIRITS: ON MATSIGENKA  
NOTIONS OF SHAMANISM AND MEDICINE  
(AND THE RESILIENCE OF AN INDIGENOUS  
SYSTEM OF KNOWLEDGE)**

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The world according to most Amazonian Indians is a place where no sharp distinction can be made between the social, the natural and the supernatural, rather than constituting separate realities they are interconnected and mutually interdependent. In the following I explore some ontological dimensions of health, healing, and shamanism among the Matsigenka of southeastern Peru's montaña area<sup>1</sup> and to do so it is necessary to take into account notions of body, spirit and conviviality. The inquiry focuses on conceptual systems behind notions of healing and of the power of the medicine, that is, on cultural rather than on instrumental explanations. I am interested not only in what people say but also in how they express themselves; verbal expressions provide a convenient entrance into conceptualisations of the world as perceived and

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<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork upon which this paper is based has principally been carried out among the Matsigenka of the Upper Urubamba area. I visited the Matsigenka the first time in 1972 and since then I have returned a number of times for longer and shorter periods.

etymological analysis therefore plays an important part of the inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most conspicuous aspects of Matsigenka shamanism and one that needs to be addressed in this context is that, for at least the last six to seven decades, the number of shamans is said to be dwindling. In many localities it is maintained that there are no-longer any shamans left. According to Bennett (1996) this development is to a high degree due to the introduction of Western diseases<sup>3</sup> that still have fatal consequences among the indigenous peoples of Amazonia. Those shamans who functioned while inquiries have been made have, moreover, by their local neighbours been attributed with less knowledge and power than those who existed earlier (cf. García 1936b, Shepard 1999b). The position of shamans among the Matsigenka is in this respect at odds when seen in relation to the prominent position shamans hold among some of the neighbouring peoples. The playing down of the significance of Matsigenka shamans is, however, not a unique phenomenon and occurs also among other

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<sup>2</sup> My present focus on conceptual and etymological aspects also follows from the condition that I have myself still not had any opportunity to attend a shamanic session. As regards my information on what happens during such séances it is based principally on conversations with Matsigenka interlocutors. The Swiss ethnographer Gerhard Baer is probably the one who has studied Matsigenka shamanism most thoroughly (cf. 1976, 1979, 1984, 1992, 1994). My information is largely but not entirely in concordance with his accounts.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between 'illness' and 'disease,' which is common in medical anthropology, suggests that bio-medically defined pathological states ('disease') differ in a qualitative sense from a person's culturally based perceptions and experiences ('illness') (cf. Young 1982: 264f). This distinction is basically ethnocentric as bio-medical systems must be considered to be as culturally biased as are, for instance, the Matsigenka medical systems. I do here not use the term 'sickness' and no distinction is made between terms employed as to their degree of scientificity.

peoples of the western Amazon where it is common that shamans from foreign groups are attributed with greater powers than the shamans from the own group (cf. Gow 1994).

### **Shamans and sorcerers among the Matsigenka**

The Matsigenka shaman is known as *seripigari*, a word that is constructed from *seri* meaning 'tobacco,' *piga*, which is a concept with a complex meaning dimension, and the suffix *-ri*, being the third person male pronominal object, that is, 'him.' One common mode of translating *pigagantsi* (i.e., the infinitive of *piga*) is "to intoxicate" which would render *seripigari* "he who is intoxicated by tobacco" (cf. Baer 1992). Another possible meaning dimension is suggested by Shepard (1998: 331) who notes that *pigagantsi* also can be translated as "to return" which would render *seripigari* "the one who returns tobacco." Shepard sees this return as a reference to the regurgitation of tobacco that the shaman has swallowed and then passes on to his apprentices who in this process acquire the same magical powers as their teacher. I assume, though, that the receivers of the tobacco also could be the *saangarite* spirits who in mythical time gave the Matsigenka the tobacco and whom shamans now daily feed with tobacco smoke and syrup. Of the various possible translations of the word *seripigari* I do not believe that one necessarily is more correct than any other; the different translations rather reflect different aspects of the complex whole.

As a ritual specialist, the shaman possesses deeper insights in metaphysics than people do in general. The importance of the shaman does, however, not follow from his specialised knowledge of ritual and cosmology but from his personal acquaintance with the *saangarite*

spirits, "the invisible ones."<sup>4</sup> Thus, neither the possession of esoteric knowledge nor the altered state of consciousness induced by the ingestion of psychoactive drugs are considered sufficient to engage in rewarding relationships with the *saangarite*. To become accepted by such spirits, a necessary initial step is the establishment of personal relations with one of them who subsequently becomes a spirit helper, *serepitotsi*. This spirit helper resides in either a peculiarly shaped "transparent" stone or a small wooden anthropomorphic figure, which both are known as *serepitotsi*.<sup>5</sup> Another designation used for referring to the spirit helper is *inetsáne* that signifies 'he with whom I converse.' When a shaman is in contact with his spirit helpers these are usually addressed as 'brothers' in accordance to the relationship terminology. This mode of address and reference suggest that the relation with spirit helpers is one of sharing, stressing similarity and companionship,<sup>6</sup> rather than of measured transactions in a commercial sense in which difference is stressed. The kind of relationship between a shaman

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<sup>4</sup> *Saangaríte*, which is a plural form of *saankari*, is usually translated as "the pure ones" which as a rule is conceived of in a moral sense as synonymous with "the good ones." This is, however, to impose a Western manichean model on a metaphor that does not refer to absolute moral conceptions of good and evil (cf. Rosengren 1998). Since *saankari* also is used to describe clean water it is here suggested that it is the visual rather than the moral quality that is referred to. Clean water cannot be seen and neither can the *saangaríte*.

<sup>5</sup> The literal significance of the word *serepitotsi* remains unclear. Baer (1984: 327) translates the word with 'tobacco stone.'

<sup>6</sup> Associated with the word *pigagantsi* is *gipigagantsi* which, according to Snell (1998: 92) means among other things 1) to make one return to the place of origin, and to send back (to return). The shaman is, accordingly, also he who returns to the primordial conditions that initially was shared by all Matsigenka, i.e., humans and *saangarite* alike.

and his spirit helper should accordingly not be seen as based on reciprocal exchanges where the *serepitotsi* provides the shaman with knowledge and power in exchange for tobacco and other services which is a common theme in the ethnography of Amazonian peoples (cf. Wilbert 1987: 173ff). As the relation between shamans and spirits is one of companionship, the sharing – the exchange of goods and services without calculating returns – is a sign of the acknowledgement of “sameness”.<sup>7</sup>

A further category of being which is important to the shaman is the *kamagárini*, 'the one who kills,' that is, the various kinds of demons, who are kept at bay mainly with the help of those *saangarite* with whom the shaman is acquainted. The *kamagárini* are important to the sorcerers, *machikanari*, who strive to maintain good relations with them. The *kamagárini* can then be employed to assist the sorcerers in their base, selfish attempts to inflict pain and to create fear and disturbance among their fellows. Sorcery consists of two different techniques and it seems as if Matsigenka sorcerers tend to specialise in one or the other. One technique makes use of objects that have been part of or at least in contact with the intended victim through which disease, death or any other kind of calamity may be sent. The specialists of this technique are in Matsigenka known as *gavogutantsirira*. Sorcerers using the other technique make use of magical weapons, such as black stones, bones and twigs, with which they strike their victims. Specialists of this kind are called *machikanari* which also seems to be the generical designation for 'sorcerer.'<sup>8</sup> Although there are important differences between sorcerers and shamans,

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<sup>7</sup> Baer (1995: 101) says “the shaman ... through his ingestion of tobacco approaches the status of the spirits.”

<sup>8</sup> The etymology of the word *machikanari* is unclear.

the distinction between the two kinds of practitioners are probably less clear cut in practice than in theory.

Although emphasis in this paper is on shamans, it should be clear that these are not the only ones who engage in healing among the Matsigenka. Shamans are engaged mainly when a patient cannot be cured by the remedies that are at hand in every family where, particularly, women are responsible for healing and the administration of medicine. Just outside the residential houses and in most fields, women cultivate herbs they find useful for the maintenance of the health of the members of their respective household. Even though the knowledge of the herbal medicines are said to come originally from the *saangarite* spirits by way of the shamans, most of the practices and the associated herbal lore is today transmitted from senior women to junior, from mothers and grandmothers to daughters and granddaughters.

### **Matsigenka disease aetiology**

Among Western observers two main views of Matsigenka disease aetiology are discernible. According to the proponents of one opinion, the Matsigenka make a distinction between natural and spiritual causes of unhealth (cf. Bennett 1991, Casevitz-Renard 1976, Strongin 1982). Others hold, in contrast, that this distinction cannot be upheld since there either are no natural causes (cf. Baer 1984) or because the two aetiology concepts overlap to the extent that they become inseparable (Shepard 1999a). García (1936a) moreover argues that health ultimately is seen as a moral issue. Considering that Matsigenka conceptions of the world are basically non-Cartesian, the second viewpoint seems logically more coherent with general ontological assumptions where the differentiation between natural and supernatural dissolve into a

unitary system in their monistic cosmology. However, among those Matsigenka who associate with institutions and representatives of the national society, theories of microbial agents that explain certain forms of disease have begun to gain acceptance but it is still far from a generally shared conception.

To understand Matsigenka ideas about disease aetiology it is necessary first to clarify Matsigenka notions of what constitutes the human existential condition. Cosmos consists of an uneven number of worlds that are placed the one above the other.<sup>9</sup> In the beginning of time, these worlds were empty and inhabited only by the two creator gods: *Tashorintsi*, who lived on the uppermost world, and *Kentivákori*, who, at that time, lived on the world in the middle. One day they met and soon they started to fight about who of the two was the true creator. In the contest that followed *Tashorintsi* created everything that is good, among other things "humans," i.e. *matsigenka*, which is a category that includes not only humans but also the *saangarite* spirits, some animals and even certain plants, notably the gigantic lupuna tree (*Chorisia speciosa*).<sup>10</sup> *Kentivákori*, on the other hand, created only useless and defect things, among them White people and demons. At this time the good things were really good; what we in this world presently consider as good things are but pale replicas of what they originally were. The qualitative deterioration of the things that *Tashorintsi* created was caused by a man who became

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<sup>9</sup> Often the number of worlds is given as five but occasionally the universe is said to contain only three worlds – the one upon which we live is, however, always the one in the middle.

<sup>10</sup> The inclusion of the lupuna tree in this category may seem somewhat strange as this tree is associated with the sorcerer, *machikanari*. According to Baer (1984: 219), the sorcerer drinks the white, milk-like sap of the lupuna tree to arouse the demonic substances that abides in his breast.

tired of the perfect life he was leading. The man approached *Tashorintsi* with the request for being able to feel hunger, to become ill and to die. *Tashorintsi* became quite upset by this demonstration of ungratefulness and, after having submitted to the man's insisting demands, he angrily left to return to the uppermost world from whence he had come. Since then he will not have anything to do with humans. Thus, today, humankind is characterised by weakness and imperfection in contrast to the *saangarite* who still remain as perfect as they were the day they were created.

As a consequence of humankind's enfeebled conditions, humans are today susceptible to disease. According to Matsigenka cosmogony, disease belongs to the makings of *Kentivákorí* and it is visited upon us, in various forms, by different *kamagáriní* as well as by spirits of the dead, *kamatsirini*. *Ináenka*, who is depicted as an ugly old woman, is one of the most important of the disease-spreading demons. She bears the main responsibility for the spread of contagious epidemics where the skin is affected, like, for instance, smallpox and measles. Another important agent is the class of demons who is called *Kepigarúite*. They work closely with the *machikanari* in a way that in many respects corresponds to the way in which the *seripigari* associate with the *inetsáane*.<sup>11</sup> The *Kepigarúite* provide, for instance, the *machikanari* with those diseases that

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<sup>11</sup> The Dominican missionary Secundino García spent much time trying to understand Matsigenka religion. He described (1937:12) the sorcerers' séances in the following way: "To communicate with said spirits, they celebrate, like the *seripigari*, their magical functions. Some drink *ayahuasca*, tobacco, and "mushroom juice" (*kabuiniri*); others eat the fruit from certain trees. They also sing, though on their own, no-one accompany them. They sing silently, standing upright, looking at the ground and clapping their hands."



strike individuals. The *Kepigaríte* demons are the spiritual Masters of “poison” and of two classes of disease. One kind of disease makes the affected shake as they become hot from fever, an affliction called *anátiri*. The other class of ailments are those that make the affecteds’ intestines rot. This disease is called *soromáinga*, a name that probably is related to *sorómai*, which is the name given to both a kind of nettle and, according to Glenn Shepard (pers. com.), a kind of stinging caterpillar. In the latter case the associative link is probably between the burning feeling produced by contact with the nettle and the sting of the caterpillar and the sensation of internal pain.

Both *Ináenka* and the *Kepigaríte* demons are confined under, or within, huge rocks where they also keep their diseases. They are themselves victims of the maladies they propagate which give them a hideous appearance. Occasionally they manage to escape from their dens and then they travel up and down the Urubamba river which results in the spread of epidemics. The Matsigenka notion of epidemics is metaphorically graphic, it is called *parienkatagantsi*, which has the additional meaning of ‘a drizzling rain.’ In the montaña this kind of rain makes people and things soaking wet in no time since the air is satiated with humidity. As the temperature commonly drops at the same time this rain is also associated with a sensation of chilly discomfort that is hard to escape. People freeze and they shiver with cold which, in this context, may be ominous. Baer (1984: 196) reports that shivering is conceived of as being potentially dangerous since it opens up the body for attacks from demons and death spirits. Another explanation of the spread of epidemics is provided by Shepard (pers. com. 2001): foul-smelling vapours (*kepigarienka*) seep up from the bowels of the earth, it goes up into the sky which turns yellow or into other unusual colours (*kiterienka*) and falls down causing people to become ill. Common to the two explanatory

models are the suppositions that epidemic diseases are of subterranean origin and that phenomena described as *enkatsi* are the means of propagation. *Enkatsi* signifies 'smoke,' 'vapour,' 'steam,' 'odour' and 'drizzling rain' and appears, for instance, in *Iná-enka* ('Mother of odours'), *pari-enka-tagantsi* ('that which falls like steam') and *kepigari-enka* ('poisonous odours').

Factors that cause people to become ill all have to do, in one way or another, with acts that upset the social order in the extended sense following from the monistic cosmology according to which the relations with the supernatural should be included. In the case of epidemics the decisive act seems to be omission, principally **not** following a shaman's advice which would have saved the population. Non-epidemic maladies are more directly generated by acts performed by the subsequent victim. Persons who upset the social balance, become susceptible to the negative influences of the *kamagárini* which eventually may lead to the loss of soul.<sup>12</sup> The process leading up to such ill-fated consequences should not be confused with a struggle between good and evil forces. I have elsewhere (Rosengren 1998) argued for the absence of a Manichean dualism in Matsigenka cosmology. The superhuman agents in cosmos constitute, accordingly, no exemplars of moral elevation or degradation. As illness ultimately is the consequence of humankind's imperfections it is necessary to constantly relate to the cosmic forces to mitigate the effects of humankind's degeneration. In order to facilitate these dealings, psychoactive drugs are of central importance as they are the means to enable contact.

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<sup>12</sup> According to the Matsigenka, humans have a number of souls; the "ordinary" soul or *nosure* ('my soul'), the bone soul or *tonkitsi*, the eye soul or *shigentiaaritsi*.

## **Medicine**

The Matsigenka use a large number of herbal medicines. Here I focus on psychoactive drugs as these are more immediately associated with the spirits than other herbal remedies. This does, however, not mean that other plants used in healing lack any association with spirits; the herbal medicines' healing efficacy is considered to have been given them by their spirit Masters which means that the pharmacological character, according to Matsigenka medicinal theory, does not reside in the plants as such.

The Matsigenka word for 'medicine' is by both José Pío Aza (1923: 177) and Betty Snell (1998: 76) given as *ampi*, a word which most probably is a loan from quechua, and it is found in, for instance, *kamarampi*, 'ayahuasca.' When referring to medicines associated with spirit contacts and healing by non-Western methods the more commonly used expression is *kepígari*, a word that is associated with the designation of the *Kepigaríte* demons, the Masters of poison. The word *kepígari* contains the element *piga*, which, as seen above, also appears in *seri-piga-ri*, 'shaman.' As noted, *pigagantsi* is a complex concept and its occurrence in various connections indicates the absence of a simple Manichean dualism of good and bad. Baer (1992: 86) suggests that the term has three meanings: 'poison,' 'medicine' and 'drug.' To this list of significances Snell (1998: 188) adds 'madness.' According to Shepard (1998: 323) the word "refers to all poisonous, toxic, narcotic and psychoactive substances and their associated chemosensory properties and physiological effects." Although the semantic field

covered by *piga* is extensive, the different meaning dimensions covered by the term have a common denominator for the Matsigenka as the different significations all relate to spiritual affections that either cause altered states of consciousness or “soul” loss followed by illness or death. To the Matsigenka the effect of *piga* is not primarily physiological since the part of the person affected is *isure*,<sup>13</sup> a term that Matsigenka often explicate as “that which he thinks” and translate into Spanish as ‘alma,’ that is, ‘soul’ which, although a problematic concept, is the translation that here will be adhered to in the following.

As suggested by the designation of the shaman as *seripigari*, tobacco is of crucial importance in Matsigenka shamanism. In healing, the use of tobacco affects both curer and patient. The significance of tobacco consists, however, not only in being an instrument in the healing process nor a means whereby the shaman intoxicates himself. Tobacco is important for the shaman because it mediates power (*iragavéane*) through attracting *saangarite* and demons and death spirits are, thus, scared away. However, most important of all, tobacco is instrumental in the maintenance of his relations with *saangarite* spirits. Tobacco smoke is considered to be an essential food item for the *saangarite* and it constitutes an essential contribution of the shaman to their relationship. To be kept in a benign mood, the spirit helper requires tobacco which

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<sup>13</sup> In the meaning of ‘soul’ this word only exist in its possessive form. The form mentioned here, *isure*, is the male third person, ‘his soul.’ When it appears in an indeterminate form, as *suretsi*, it means, according to Baer (1984: 293) ‘ghost.’ This ‘ghost’ should not be seen as a particular kind of being since the indeterminance relates to the anonymity of the ‘souls’ who have no bodies by which they can be identified. Of the different ‘souls’ distinguished by the Matsigenka, *isure* seems to be the one of most importance for the state of a person's health.

the shaman administers daily through smearing tobacco syrup, *seri opatsa*, upon the *serepitotsi*. The shaman's feeding of his spirit helper is an expression of the bond of "community" between them according to which resources are mutually shared. The kind of "kin" relationship established between them means that they consider themselves as socially close to the extent that they have mutual expectations upon each other.

Beside tobacco, the Matsigenka make use of a number of different psychoactive drugs of which two are of particular prominence. One is the drug called *kamarampi*, ayahuasca, and the other drug is brugmansia (*Brugmansia* sp., until recently classified as *Datura* sp.). The concoctions that are served at séances are, however, never made exclusively from ayahuasca or brugmansia. The actual potions that are served always include a mixture of extracts from other plants as well. The admixture most commonly used consists of an infusion made from the leaves of a small bush called *ompíkiri* (*Psychotria* sp.). The motive given for including *ompíkiri* is to make the brew more potent.<sup>14</sup>

The *kamarampi* brew is made mainly from a vine of the *Banisteriopsis* family. The Matsigenka call both the vine and the drug *kamarampi*, a word that is constructed by the combination of *kamarankagantsi*, 'to vomit,' and *ampi*, 'medicine.' *Kamarampi* is, thus, "vomiting medicine." The ayahuasca brew is a thick and bitter liquid, the preparation of which is a delicate matter that pertains to women following gender defined aspects of the division of labour. Why men should not do it

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<sup>14</sup> According to Shepard (pers.com 2001) *ompíkiri* is in the Manu area known as *orovampashi*, 'Urubamba leaf,' because its use as an additive to ayahuasca was learned from Matsigenka from the Urubamba area. Before the introduction of *ompíkiri* ayahuasca was used in a more concentrated form together with other plants, but not with *Psychotria*.

remains unclear. According to most interlocutors it should be pre-pubertal girls who prepare the concoction.<sup>15</sup> This condition they relate to notions of sexuality and particularly to fear of contact with menstrual blood which is associated with the *kamagárini* and human decline.<sup>16</sup> Pre-pubertal girls are in this respect considered to be harmless in contrast to post-menstrual women who still are “stained” by their earlier sexuality and therefore continue to exude and transmit what to the sensitive *saangarite* is experienced as the foul stench of menstruation.<sup>17</sup> Other interlocutors say that the task of preparing the brew is the responsibility of the wife/wives of the shaman. Whoever is said to prepare the drug, the dangers of “pollution” are usually commented upon and sexual abstinence is a requirement for both the one who prepares the brew and for those who are planning to take it.

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<sup>15</sup> The shaman, or the man who is going to stage a *séance*, goes into the forest to gather the required quantity of the vine. The vine is frequently found in former swiddens that have been abandoned for some years. When the vine is brought back to the house it is given to the woman who is to prepare the brew. Early in the morning of the day when the *séance* is going to be performed the woman pounds the vine, mixes it with water that is put to boil in a carefully cleaned pot. After a while she extracts the vine from the pot and she pounds it again and then she returns the fibry mash to the pot and further boiling. This is repeated until the liquid has been reduced and become thick and dark when the pot is taken from the fire and the brew is left to cool.

<sup>16</sup> It is said that if a shaman should come in contact with menstrual blood he dies immediately from loss of blood as his jugular vein will spring open. Other men become weak and unable to hunt.

<sup>17</sup> According to Shepard (1999a: 245, 249) the odour of menstruation is called *anigarienka* (raw meat/blood odour) or *kepigarienka* (intoxicating odour).

It should be stressed that the notion of 'pollution' is here an analytical interpretation of what Matsigenka talk about as 'dangers.' The Matsigenka differ from the *saangarite* owing to their own actuation through which they lost the perfection that the *saangarite* still retain. This difference signifies that the *saangarite* potentially may create dangers, mainly through lack of concern towards the non-familiar. By socially cultivating the spirits, Matsigenka become, however, more similar to the *saangarite* and, thus, the risks are reduced as humans become more familiar, both in the sense of 'being known' and in the sense of 'being like family.'<sup>18</sup> From this follows that sex should be abstained from, not because it is impure or improper *per se* (on the contrary it is something in which Matsigenka men and women take pleasure) but because it underlines the difference with the *saangarite* in being the most obvious mark of humankind's mortality. The human existential condition requires sexual reproduction in order to maintain the human collective's continuity and, thus, it creates social distance from the immortal spirits, which is precisely what the Matsigenka, and particularly the shamans, strives to overcome. Accordingly, among humans sex is not "matter out of place," it is so only in the relation with the *saangarite*. Sexual abstinence is, consequently, another expression for the bond of "community" with the *saangarite* that is so important to establish for the Matsigenka.

The species of brugmansia used, are bushes that are approximately one meter in height with lanceolate hairy

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<sup>18</sup> In regard to the dangers of differences, Overing (1996: 7) writes, "the idea is that those who in the first instance are dangerously 'different in kind' ... become 'of a kind' through the process of living together .... The mutuality of living together creates a certain sort of material homogeneity. This is the aim of community life, to achieve a safe, yet fertile, 'community of similars'."

leaves and pale whitish, trumpet-like flowers. When preparing the drug the Matsigenka use three to four leaves<sup>19</sup> that are cut in small slices which are mixed with water to make an infusion that contains alkaloids like *hyoscyamin* and *tropan*. The brugmansia plant the Matsigenka call *sáaro*, *pankirintsi* or *jayapa*. In comparison to ayahuasca, the Matsigenka make use of brugmansia only rarely and there is not much information in the literature on its employment. The Matsigenka themselves stress the different effects of the two drugs; the effects of ayahuasca is said to be easier to control and it is therefore less dangerous to use. The greater perils connected with the ingestion of brugmansia is the common Matsigenka explanation for the reluctance to make use of this drug. The people in the Amazon who seems to ingest brugmansia most frequently is the Shuar who, however, also employ it with much caution. Harner (1972: 153) notes that "Shamans prefer to use *natemä* [i.e., ayahuasca] rather than *maikua* [i.e., brugmansia] ... because the potency of the latter is too great for the shaman to be able to function ritually." When reflecting upon what the problem of control that the Matsigenka conceive of in the utilisation of brugmansia signify for them, it is easy to assume that it refers to the drug's strength which is what Harner suggests is the case among the Shuar. From the perspective of the Matsigenka, this problem of control may, however, be conceived of in different terms.

In this context the crucial distinction that Matsigenka make between ayahuasca and brugmansia seems primarily to refer to the different kinds of acting

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<sup>19</sup> Different parts of this plant may apparently be employed to produce psychoactive drugs. Like the Matsigenka, the Yagua use the leaves to prepare a brew (Chaumeil 1998: 136) while, according to Harner (1972: 137), the Shuar use "the raw juice of the green bark of the stems."



required of the user rather than to the drugs' chemical constitutions or different hallucinatory strengths. While users under the influence of ayahuasca maintain a public communication with both those present at the séance and the *saangarite*, the one under brugmansia influence is largely beyond contact. As an effect, the employment of ayahuasca is associated with the cooperation of the audience and the *saangarite* while interlocutors seem to imply that the control problem associated with brugmansia, at least partly, consists in the condition that the user travels unguided by spirit helpers and has alone to confront the dangers in the parallel world in order to study and learn. The motive for employing drugs is, thus, the wish to *do* things, not merely of seeing things.<sup>20</sup>

### **Healing and the use of psychoactive drugs**

As far as it is possible to ascertain from available information, the Matsigenka shamanistic healing process consists of two parts that both are closely related to the aetiological notions discussed above. The first part of the healing process consists in acquiring the needed information to diagnose the fundamental cause of the ailment which requires the help of either ayahuasca or brugmansia. The second part consists in the proper healing.

In matsigenka 'to cure' is *vegagantsi* which is a concept that refers to the acting of the curer. When referring to the effect of the remedy applied it is the word *gaveagantsi* that is used.<sup>21</sup> A conceptual distinction

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<sup>20</sup> Brown (1986: 30) makes a similar observation of an association between vision and doing among the Aguaruna.

<sup>21</sup> Snell (1998: 90f) notes four additional meanings of the verb *gaveagantsi*: 1) to be able; 2) to conquer, to win; 3) to convince;

seems, accordingly, to be made between the healing effect of the remedy on the one hand and its application on the other. The curer, be he shaman or herbal expert, is thus but an administrator of the medicine which ultimately acquires its healing quality from the *saangarite*.

The initial contacting of *saangarite* spirits is made during séances which usually are held in the house of the shaman where he is assisted by his wife/wives, his spiritual stand in, that is, his *inetsáne*, and perhaps also an apprentice. The séance is always held at night and in complete darkness if it had not been for the feeble light from a small oil lamp that helps the participants to find their way and to avoid tripping over things on the floor. The drug that has been prepared is served at the séance in a jug. At the occasions when ayahuasca has been taken during which I have been present, the jug has been made of plastic and the drug has been taken with a simple metallic spoon which means that the tools employed have been congenial with the general lack of both special paraphernalia and ritual solemnity. In order to find the jug with the brew in the darkness, it is placed beside the small oil lamp at the centre of a plaited mat on the floor. At the séances that I have witnessed the men who took the drug gathered initially on the mat around the jug, where they conversed in a rather casual manner with the other men on the mat as well as with others who were sitting or laying on their beds along the walls of the house. When the men begin to ingest the brew they return to their beds and they only go back to the mat for more of the decoction. At the same time they smoke tobacco and ingest tobacco syrup (*seri opatsa*) in order to acquire strength in preparation for what is to come.

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and 4) to penetrate or enter profoundly. In regard to the healing effect of medicines these further meanings could be seen as so many dimensions of a complex concept.

At healing séances, I am told, the shaman starts after a while to chant hummily and from now on the jug is left untouched. The shaman keeps on singing during the entire remaining part of the session. The singing takes the form of a dialog in which the shaman's wife/wives sing(s) in response to him.<sup>22</sup> Occasionally the shaman climbs a ladder that leads to a platform under the roof from where sounds of rattling and "feather whipping" (an ordinary fan made of feathers is lightly struck against the palm of the hand) can be heard. According to the Matsigenka, the shaman has now left to visit his *saangarite* friends while his spirit helper, *inetsane*, has come to visit the household. The general understanding, it seems, is that it is the soul of the shaman who has left and that the *inetsane* has entered his body.<sup>23</sup> Shepard (1999b: 93) reports, however, that in the Manu River region it is believed that a spirit twin takes the place of the shaman who leaves for the home of *saangarite*. Also Baer (1994: 90) mentions that similar ideas exist in the Urubamba area according to which the shaman departs, body and soul, and is replaced by his *inetsane* who materialise in a transformed shape to look like the shaman that left.<sup>24</sup>

During his drug-induced trip to the other-world where the *saangarite* live, the shaman knows where to go and how to get there as he earlier has been guided to the

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<sup>22</sup> An extensive excerpt of the oral exchange that takes place at shamanic séances is found in Baer (1984 and 1992).

<sup>23</sup> The body is usually compared to the dress, *imanhake*, of the soul and, thus, it is something that one can think of as exchangeable and which, at least theoretically, could be worn by various users one at a time.

<sup>24</sup> *Saangarite* are normally only the size of a 10 year old child and a common metaphor for these spirits is, in accordance, *ananeyki*, 'child.'

place and he has perhaps made several prior visits as well. Without assistance or previous experience, travelling with the help of drugs is considered a hazardous endeavour, it is easy to go astray and to be intercepted by unfriendly and hostile beings, animals, *kamagárini* and perhaps also unfamiliar *saangarite*. The spirit world is similar to our world and the *saangarite* live in a manner that resembles the life of the Matsigenka, only it is much better; they have more and superior food, and their manioc beer is more tasty and much stronger. As the shaman arrives at the house of his *saangarite* friends, he is entertained by his spirit hosts who give him to eat and to drink. He now also gets to ask for advice about, for instance, the cause for a person's ailments and its proper mode of treatment.

Since diseases immediately are caused by soul loss, one part of the cure is aimed at recovering or retaining the soul within the patient's body, another part consists in building a defence against attacks from demons. The place where the soul leaves and enters the body is situated at the top of the head, which is considered as the soul's "gateway". The top of the patient's head is, accordingly, the place upon which the shaman focuses his attention, he paints it red with a paste made from achiote fruits (*Bixa orellana*) and he blows tobacco smoke upon it. The purpose of blowing tobacco smoke on the top of the patient's head is to ritually "clean" the victim to facilitate the attraction of *saangarite* spirits who feed upon the smoke. The presence of *saangarite* is an important part of the defence of the one being ill as it scares away *kamagárini*. The achiote smeared on the skull has the multiple purpose to "close" the patient's body and to attract both the wandering soul of the patient and *saangarite* spirits who feed upon the fragrance from the paste. In healing it is of utmost importance to "close" the body because thus it is difficult for the soul to leave and, still more importantly, it hinders the *kamagárini* to penetrate the body of the

diseased. Demon attacks, which often take the form of sexual violations, principally consist of the penetration of the victim's body or other activities that seem to be sexually related. The "closing" of the body puts an effective stop to demons' intentions to enter. There are many different kinds of demons but one of the most salient characteristics that they all seem to share is their spectacular genitalia: male demons are equipped with huge penises and female demons' vaginas are lined with sharp teeth. When the demons use their genitalia on humans the purpose is not to reproduce, nor to produce pleasure, but to maim and kill their victims.

According to Baer (1994: 86), the shaman, at this point in the healing process, sucks out a stone or twig from the patient. However, following interlocutors in the Upper Urubamba the shaman does no such thing, as soul retrieval which is the crucial trick that makes the patient regain his or her health.<sup>25</sup> The important thing then is to close the outer "hull," that is, the body of the patient irrespectively of if it has been penetrated by magical weapons or the monsters' genitalia. The corporeal body is metaphorically described as clothing, *manchakintsi*, and the task of the shaman is to mend the holes in the body in the same way that tears in clothes are mended.

### **Matsigenka shamanism**

Matsigenka notions of disease aetiology and healing are, as demonstrated above, integral parts of an encompassing ontological and epistemological complex.

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<sup>25</sup> The assumption that shamans do not extract alien objects which cause the ailments that the patients are suffering from and which have been placed there by magical means may seem inconsistent with the description of the technique of the *machikanari* being based on the use of magical weapons (see above).

Health and unhealth are, thus, not merely a matter of physical and mental well being since fundamental existential conditions are also concerned. Knowledge of these conditions and of how to act and make use of the system of forces at work beyond the visible world are decisive for the general well being of the individual as well as of the community. The *seripigari* ought, consequently, to be of considerable importance since they are the principal human agents, together with the *machikanari*, in the relationship with powers of the primordial order (that is, the *saangarite* and *kamaqáriní*) who must be balanced against each other but who also constitute the principal means whereby humans get access to what once was lost.

Considering the importance of the ritual specialists, the alleged absence of shamans today could be assumed to have serious repercussions on principal tenets of Matsigenka world views and, not least, on notions of disease aetiology and healing. The present acceptance and even reliance on Western medicine among the Matsigenka may, in accordance, be construed, at least partly, as an effect of the shamans' disappearance. The acceptance of Western bio-medical treatments does, however, not seem to be associated with a competitive and conflictive process in which a Matsigenka system of herbal treatment eventually has lost. Rather, the two systems of medical knowledge are seen as complementary and they are resorted to in parallel, that is, people make use of the mode of treatment that at the moment is most easily available.

Herbal medical lore is, thus, still of consequence and its significance may even be growing which the appearance of male herbal curers (*curanderos*) suggests. These men constitute a new kind of medical specialist though they do not replace women who still are responsible for most treatments through the administration of the multitude of household remedies. The male *curanderos* are,

however, supposed to have a specialised expertise in herbal medicine, which they allegedly have acquired in the main from Shipibo curers. Some of these Matsigenka herbalists have a far-reaching reputation on the Urubamba River and their clientele consists not only of Matsigenka as their services are sought after also by Asháninka, Yine and Mestizo people.

Those Matsigenka *curanderos* with whom I have had an opportunity to speak say that they do not rely on spirit helpers in their healing practices which distinguishes them from shamans. This new expression and organisation of the application of herbal medicine in actual healing practices may, thus, seem to underwrite the decline of Matsigenka shamanism. The *curanderos'* herbal pharmacology is, however, part of a Matsigenka tradition of knowledge that includes spirits. In accordance, it is not the chemical substances of the plants that are considered as the decisive agents in herbal medicines but it is the “master” of each kind of plant used who provides the force that produces the particular curative effect associated with each remedy. Moreover, the notion that the knowledge of each particular plant used in healing was originally transmitted by the *saangarite* spirits is still a fundamental pillar in the knowledge system based on herbal medicines.

When the present apparent insignificance of shamans is seen in relation to the role shamans play among neighbouring peoples the disinterest that Matsigenka seems to demonstrate may strike one as somewhat strange. Gray (1997) describes the emotional commotion that struck the Arakmbut when their last shaman died. Similar disturbances do not seem to have hit the Matsigenka in spite of the present almost conspicuous absence of shamans, it has in any case not left any notable traits in narratives. Also the Asháninka groups, who socially and culturally are close to the

Matsigenka, are deeply engaged in their shamans. In contrast to the situation among the Matsigenka and the Arakmbut, among the Asháninka shamans play presently an important role both as ritual specialists and in public politics. While the disappearance of Matsigenka shamans commonly is assumed to be an effect of the increased contacts with the national society, this seems to be the motive for the social and political prominence that Asháninka shamans have acquired.

When Matsigenka talk to me about the current absence of shamans no expression of loss or worry have been voiced. The condition is, on the contrary, described matter of factly. Shamans are said to be something that belonged to the past and they existed twenty, thirty, perhaps forty years ago. Those shamans, who still exist, live deep in the forest and are much less powerful than those who functioned in former times. These accounts of the present situation replicates almost verbatimly what Secundino García was told during the 1930s when he was told that:

[...] now there are no seripigari; you only come across one or other, and they are not authentic, they are nothing but apprentices or aficionados.

Moreover, I asked for the reason why there now are no seripigari like in those past times, to this they give no motive; but they assure that deep in the forest in areas rarely visited by foreign people, there still are many (García 1936b:213).

How are we to interpret the close resemblance of these two answers despite the approximately 65 years difference in time of their delivery? If merely the literal significance is considered the similarities may be nothing more than a coincidence. The only discrepancy in the statements would be the time given for the period



during which there have been no shamans. However, as Western time reckoning is something alien to many Matsigenka the time for which there is said to have been no shamans could then perhaps be seen as analogous to “a long time, the extension of which is largely unknown.”

Another way to approach these parallel answers is to see them as expressions of a culturally determined relationship towards shamans and the powers with which they are involved. This means that the literal significance of the statements should be disregarded in favour of a “formulaic” perspective where the statements as such are placed in focus and where they acquire an almost inverted performative function: by not mentioning existing shamans, they and their powers are not evoked. The motive for people to avoid speaking about those shamans who are around could, for instance, be fear of potential consequences that may befall the speaker. Among the Matsigenka, such a form of avoidance would not be singular since also in other contexts are mentioning supposed to evoke attraction which make people refrain from talking about particular subjects. People are, for instance, reluctant to talk about recently deceased persons since the deads’ spirits may hear and show up with potentially fatal consequences for those present.

From this alternative perspective, the two statements that apparently talk about the absence of shamans do, as a consequence, not necessarily say that there are no shamans today. Although it is only possible to speculate, as there for obvious reasons are not much information available, the assumed reluctance to name shamans has been observed. García (1936b: 213) mentions, accordingly, that a shaman was living in the neighbourhood of the missionary station at Koribeni during two years without the missionaries learned anything about the man's functions until he had left

although they were in frequent contact with him. The most obvious explanation for this silence is that as a representative of a different religious creed the shaman preferred to leave the missionaries unaware of his functions and powers since they otherwise probably would try to convert him to Christianity. This would, however, not explain why all other Matsigenka in contact with the missionaries kept their tongues about the man's position only until he had left. If it had been that they feared that the existence of shamans in any way would affect the missionaries appreciation of them it is more likely that the man's shamanistic functions would have been left unrevealed. Similarly, during a stay in the community of Matoriato I was introduced to a man knowledgeable in esoteric matters. That this man was a shaman (or at least had functioned as such) I learned only later when reading Gerhard Baer's treaty on Matsigenka religion (1984) in which he discusses an account of a shamanistic séance which Wayne Snell, an American missionary *cum* linguist, observed in the Manu River area where this man functioned as the acting shaman (see also Baer and Snell 1974).

The rather surprising conclusion which the acceptance of such an assumption would lead to is that Matsigenka shamanism might still be vigorous and that its denial is an indication thereupon. The conceived insignificance of shamans in some western Amazonian societies described by Gow (1994) could perhaps also be interpreted as conforming to such a conceptualisation and mode of relating to shamans and the cosmic powers with which they are involved. Like the Matsigenka, other indigenous peoples of Western Amazonia express an admiration for foreign and especially urban Mestizo shamans who are openly named and discussed. Distance and anonymity might be sufficient insurance against the undesired consequences that is produced by an unwarranted revelation of shamans' identities particularly if these are alien and not of the forest.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Matsigenka conceive of the world as a place where the primordial forces still play a decisive role in forming the life and well-being of both particular individuals and local groups alike. Society, nature and supernature form a coherent whole within which all beings – humans, superhumans and animals – are socially interrelated. As these social relations principally are of a dyadic nature, that is, between individuals with all their particular idiosyncrasies, the various beings involved do not interrelate uniformly. The relations between particular individuals belonging to different categories differ accordingly in the same way and to the same extent that relations within any of the categories may differ.

As long as this animistic universe is maintained shamans will remain prominent integrative agents since they associate with spirits with whom they, through emphasising the common origin and fundamental similarity, re-establish the primordial relations that existed in mythic times. This is a common theme in the ethnography of Amazonian peoples. However, in regard at least to the Matsigenka, I see these relations not in terms of a calculated exchange by separate and independent parts but as an uninterested sharing between intimate partners. The decisive condition that generates this bond of intimacy is the establishment of sameness and mutuality. The main endeavour of the shamans is, accordingly, to stress their familiarity with the *saangarite* and, by establishing links of kinship, they are given access to the spirits' intellectual and material assets at the same time as the spirits are fed and nurtured. The emphasis on similarity and the establishment of close familiarity serve to establish shared rights in the resources available to the involved parties.

Although it is important for the Matsigenka in general to maintain good relations with *saangarite* spirits, most Matsigenka do not interact with the spirits on the personal plane that shamans do, partly, at least, because it requires the satisfaction of the sets of mutual rights and obligations that characterizes all forms of conviviality. Since the maintenance of intimate relations with spirits can be considered as taxing, many obviously choose not to establish such links and, as a consequence, they will not have an immediate share in the resources of the spirits. From this follows that the position of shamans is of crucial importance and they must accordingly be treated with much caution – which, perhaps, is what the avoidance to talk about them expresses.

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