Contact Crisis: Shamanic Explorations of Virtual and Possible Worlds

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Abstract: This article seeks to understand why something I had presumed to be problematic—the crisis that contact with the West must have inevitably provoked in shamanic practice—has not been so for the Shipibo-Conibo shamans. To account for the shamans' different experience of contact, we will explore their radically different ontology, which is based on another enactment of living "worlds" and temporality. Taking the shamans' ontology seriously into account will allows us to illustrate other ways of actualizing reality and to problematize the common distinction between the illusory and imaginary aspects of religion versus the reality of history and contact.

Keywords: shamanism, contact, worlds-making, temporality, Amazonia, Shipibo-Conibo.

Résumé : Cet article a comme point de départ la question suivante: pourquoi un évènement qui me semblait problématique—la crise que le contact avec l'Occident devait nécessairement provoquer pour la pratique chamanique—ne l'était pas pour les chamanes shipibo-conibo? Il s'agira de répondre à cette question en explorant l'ontologie radicalement différente des chamanes shipibo-conibo, notamment leur actualisation de 'multivers' et leur temporalité circulaire. Prendre sérieusement en compte l'ontologie des chamanes permettra d'illustrer une autre manière d'appréhender la réalité et de problématiser la distinction courante entre les aspects illusoires et imaginaires de la religion versus la réalité de l'histoire et du contact.

Mots-clés : Chamanisme, Contact, Multivers, Temporalité, Amazonie, Shipibo-Conibo

Introduction

As a young anthropologist undertaking my first ethnographic fieldwork among the Shipibo-Conibo of the Western Amazon in the 1990s, I naively expected to observe a pronounced disintegration of their shamanic practice, a consequence of their increased relations with national and international agents such as missionaries, healthcare and education professionals, government representatives and tourists. It was a surprise for me to discover that the Western presence seemed, on the contrary, to have revitalized their shamanic practice. Rather than collapsing under the pressure of the missionaries, teachers and doctors, Shipibo-Conibo shamanism had incorporated these heterogeneous influences and undergone an explosion of creativity: hence, the emergence of unusual formulae such as "protestant-shamans," whose shamanic songs referred to hi-tech machines. In contrast to my initial assumption, more intense contact with the Western world has only increased the number of Shipibo-Conibo shamans and expanded their shamanic practice.

My starting point here is this initial misunderstanding: why had something I had presumed to be problematic—the crisis that contact with the West must have inevitably provoked in shamanic practice—not been so for the Shipibo-Conibo shamans? How do we explain the openness and plasticity of their shamanism, which had no difficulty in manipulating different knowledge and absorbing changes? My aim is not so much to observe the transformations imposed on Shipibo-Conibo shamanic practice by contact but rather to consider, to borrow Peter Gow's (2009) formulation, "the audacious innovations" Shipibo-Conibo shamans have extracted from contact. Such a distinction is important to make, since, contrary to what I had first assumed, contact did not mean the same thing for the Shipibo-Conibo shamans and for myself; contact was indeed lived out very differently.

My own idea of contact is based on my Western conception of a linear time, the history of the past insofar as it reflects real and concrete facts, which results from a cosmology that considers the world unitary and regulated by uniform laws. For the Shipibo-Conibo shamans though, reality does not entail a pre-given objective universe; it does not suppose a single, shared world but rather a multiplicity of worlds and potential subjectivities, a "multiverse" (Viveiros de Castro 2009:29). Therefore, the shamans' temporality does not concern "the real facts of history" but the circular time of myths. The purpose of this article is to explore the shamans' experience of contact acknowledging this radically different ontology, which is based on another enactment of living worlds and temporality.

Taking another ontology seriously into account implies rendering perceptible our own naturalistic perspective (Descola 1996). A long anthropological tradition—since Tylor's conceptualization of "animism" and Frazer's ideas of "magic"—has led many to consider the shamans' explanations as superstition or folklore, something interesting to study but "obviously" not real; a cultural construction that is good to think about but false. Throughout the 20th century, many attempts have been made to free shamanism from its "irrational" or "illogical" stigma; we can, notably, think of Lévi-Strauss's (1974) theory of the "effectiveness of symbols." Nevertheless, conceiving shamanism as a "system of belief" or as a way of "representing the world"—in others words, as a religious "cultural view" on the unquestioned "real nature"—only reproduces our own ontology and fails to consider the shamans' "multiverse."

The comparative framework of "religion as a cultural system" (Geertz 1973) and shamanism as a "cosmovision" or "worldview," remains enclosed in our naturalistic grounds, reasserting our own ontology (different cultural ideas on one and the same world) without acknowledging the shamans' "worlds-making." Furthermore, dismissing the shamans' experience as belief "implicitly claims to have an epistemological superior understanding of 'the world' not clouded by culture" (Blaser 2009:17). Such an approach involuntarily reproduces the predominant colonial attitude of "they believe," but "we know" (Stengers 2008). Trying to avoid this colonial attitude by "respecting culture," following a "tolerant multiculturalism" (De La Cadena 2010; Stengers 2008) only conceals the problem, since we are still trapped in our ontology—different perspectives on a unitary world—blinding ourselves to the enactment of different worlds. The opportunity of really learning from difference is then paradoxically missed. To appeal to the shamans' different ontology and "worlds-making" forces us to rethink our theoretical naturalistic certainties and to further the practice of "the permanent decolonization of thought" (Viveiros de Castro 2011:128).[1]

At a time when shamanism gains in popularity in the Westerners' imaginary—considering, for example, the increasing production of literature and documentaries on the *ayahuasca*[2] illuminating path or the boom of Amazonian "spiritual quest" tourism—it seems important to emphasize that the question here is neither a matter of "belief" nor of considering the shamans' lived worlds as the "original truth." The mystical attitude "they know" appears very seducing, since it calls for immersion and desire to be affected by the shamanic experience, but it is nevertheless problematic. The danger lies in forgetting that the "reality" of an experience is always dependent on a specific ontology.[3] Assuming a common shamanic experience autonomous from a particular enactment of reality brings us back to "the true facts of a unitary world"—again, our Western ontology. Consequently, shamanism is appropriated and lived out in Western terms of truth and belief, thus undermining any possible dialogue with a different indigenous standpoint.

Rather than approaching the shamans' experiences in terms of "beliefs," as "the fantasies of others" or "fantasizing about them as leading to the true reality" (Viveiros de Castro 2011:137), this article seeks to illustrate how shamans enact very different lived worlds. Turning our backs on the shamans' explanations, judging them as erroneous and illusory, would be asserting that reality is given independently of human experience (Ingold 2000; Overing 1990). Praising them as the ultimate truth leads us to the same dead-end, a simple inversion of the equation. Another avenue, taking the shamans' ontology seriously into account, allows us to explore other ways of enacting reality and to problematize some classic anthropological ideas—in this case, the distinction often made between the illusory and immaterial aspect of religion versus the reality of history and contact. (A dichotomy that has been importantly challenged by some anthropologists, notably Gow [2001] and Sahlins [1981]).

I shall stress that acknowledging difference does not stem from an anthropologist chimera and desire to exoticize but is explicitly asserted by the shamans themselves. A notable example, the superb cosmopolitical manifesto of the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa (2010:49), written in collaboration with the anthropologist Bruce Albert, makes a loud claim for ontological self-determination:

> The speech of the people of the forest is other; The Whites think that we have to imitate them in everything. This is not what we want … we will be able to become Whites only the day they will themselves transform into Yanomami.

Similarly, the Shipibo-Conibo shamans display their difference by their very resilient shamanic practices. Out of respect for difference and in awareness of the perpetual misunderstanding implied in attempting to echo a different ontology, this article does not pretend to describe the "real realities" of the shamans. Rather, I seek to render an encounter between the Shipibo-Conibo shamans and myself that has intellectually affected my anthropological approach.

Some Context

The Shipibo-Conibo inhabit the central forest of Peru within a vast territory bordering the Ucayali river and its tributaries. In contrast to other indigenous Amazonian people, the Shipibo-Conibo have not been recently contacted; rather the opposite is the case. Since their lands are accessible via navigable river, they have known a strong missionary presence since the 17th century, followed by heightened commercial and labour exploitation since the 19th century (Morin 1998). In other words, the Shipibo-Conibo have been through a long history of social disturbance—epidemics, missionary action, war raids, slavery and ethnic fusions—which have given rise to the composite name Shipibo-Conibo.

Today the Shipibo-Conibo are in permanent contact with Western agents, largely due to the following: the enormous city of Pucallpa, located in the heart of their territory; the numerous immigrants from urban areas who have colonized their lands in search of opportunities; the demands of itinerant traders or logging firms; the development programs and primary schools dispersed throughout Shipibo-Conibo communities; the always highly active missionaries; and the increase in the number of tourists who seek the exoticism and ayahuasca quest experiences. The intensity of these contacts varies by community, depending to a large extent on their distance from Pucallpa city.

This brief contextualization tells us that the Shipibo-Conibo have been exposed to Western contact since the 17th century, a fact with important repercussions for their social practices as a whole, especially shamanism. Contrary to what might be expected in Westerners' imaginary, Shipibo-Conibo shamanism is not an archaic and immutable phenomenon exposed to contact for just a few decades[4] but a phenomenon that persists despite centuries of relations with the West, including centuries of missionary action (a history that incidentally surfaces in contemporary shamanism when shamans evoke the "flu spirits" in the form of missionaries in cassocks[5]).

It seems important to underline, however, that the Shipibo-Conibo were already exposed to exogenous influences before the arrival of the Westerners. They participated in vast networks of exchanges connecting the Amazon forest to the Andes and the Pacific Coast, involving both the trade in goods and the circulation of knowledge linked to shamanism (Chaumeil 1995:65; Renard-Casevitz et al. 1989). The complexity of these influences is illustrated, among other ways, by the mythological importance ascribed to the Inca, one of the shamans' most powerful helpers.[6] Consequently, although today Shipibo-Conibo shamans refer to Christianity, Western technologies and other modern concerns, they merely continue to do what they have always done—namely, incorporate difference and feed on alterity (Erikson 1996). This encompassing dynamic inherent to Shipibo-Conibo shamanism accounts for its resilience and vitality.[7]

Shipibo-Conibo Shamans and Their Multiverse

This initial contextualization is addressed, of course, to a Western audience seeking the concrete facts of the history of contact. Although it may seem obvious to us that the shamanic loans—references to the Inca, Christianity or modern technologies—result from Shipibo-Conibo interaction with outside agents, the shamans have an entirely different interpretation. They consider these events not through our kind of linear historical time but through the circular temporality of their myths. Hence the technological artefacts, to which the shamans refer in their mediations (airplanes, tape recorders, X-rays) are said to come not from the towns or recent contact with the West but from the forest and their own mythic ancestors.

Shipibo-Conibo myths recount how wealth and sophisticated goods were stolen by cannibal ancestors who were subsequently transformed into either Incas or Whites, successive figures of power relations. According to these myths, the Whites and their technologies first originated from the Shipibo-Conibo's own ancestors.[8] These acquisitions, which for us are wholly Western and modern, are deemed by shamans to have belonged to themselves from time immemorial. Consequently, rather than perceiving the encounter with the West as a crisis, a radical break with the past, Shipibo-Conibo shamans interpret it through their mythic accounts. Any attempt to approximate their own experience of contact thus

depends on exploring their ontology and comprehending how it differs from our own.

The Shipibo-Conibo do not invoke a unitary concept of a natural world with fixed ontological attributes. The word used for *world* in Shipibo-Conibo, *nete*, also designates *day* and *life*. Rather than reflecting a concrete and definitive reality, this concept appears to be linked to temporality, movement and experience. Just like the alternation between day and night, or life and death, Shipibo-Conibo experience the alternation between wakefulness and dreams as different worlds following in succession. Dreaming enables access to other temporalities, where everything is movement and, as in mythic times, where "transformation is anterior to form" (Viveiros de Castro 2009:33).

As Westerners, we tend to think of myths as imaginary stories or legends and of dreams as hallucinations or images that exist only in the unconscious mind; thus, the very opposite of the solid, physical world. For the Shipibo-Conibo though, these are not illusions but other lived realities, other enactments of peoples and temporalities. Dreaming entails many dangers, since the dreamer can become immersed in other lived experiences to the point of no return, a relocation elsewhere that inevitably entails death. What distinguishes the Shipibo-Conibo shamans—named *onanya*, a term meaning "the one who knows"—is precisely knowing how to shift between these diverse experiences, embodying different lives, becoming movement and transforming without having to choose between life and death, wakefulness or dreaming. It is this intermediary position, an in-between state, which allows the shamans to actualize the virtualities of the dream or myth (Viveiros de Castro 2009).

This midway position also explains the shamans' role as mediator, since they must always use their abilities to the benefit of their own kin group; if not, they will become marginalized as dangerous sorcerers (*yobe*). The Shipibo-Conibo shamans actualize other potential worlds in response to the demands of their own people, to promote success in hunting, influence the weather or restore someone's health; in short, to defend the well-being of their own group, ensuring that it does not tip in favour of another. To this end, shamans shift between the domains of animals, trees, watercourses, meteorological phenomena, stars and even objects, all of which, as we shall see, are apprehended as virtual universes. The shaman thus embodies a kind of "cosmopolitical diplomat" (Viveiros de Castro 2009:121) who negotiates between different worlds.

Illustrations

As stated in the introduction, a description of shamanism in terms of the supernatural or the imaginary—a religious phenomenon implicating the spiritual realm or a "cosmovision" representing the world—still remains overly bound to an opposition, to a palpable reality—the natural, the real, the concrete—far too close to our own cosmological depiction. To exemplify how this binarism fails to translate the shamans' multiplicity of worlds, I shall here refer to some drawings made by Shipibo-Conibo shamans in which they portray their ayahuasca experience. The interpretation of these drawings will allow me to illustrate how the shamans consider each phenomenon, entity or object as a potential universe; how for them everything can become the subject of a social relation.

The first drawing (Figure 1), made by the shaman Cesar, depicts himself on an ayahuasca journey accompanied by his wife, who is also a shaman. Travelling on the back of a boa-canoe, the shamans are entering different trees worlds, each one distinguished by the use of a specific colour: light green, purple, dark green. Cesar and his wife managed to experience these worlds—to apprehend them from the inside, as different villages, with their own people, chiefs and shamans—by observing a lengthy process of initiation in which, through extreme forms of commensality, they sought to become symbiotically linked to these new allies.

An important feature of the drawing is the positioning of the "worlds" within a relational field. Cesar and his wife are tied to the trees' worlds by the crowns of their heads (*máiti*); the boas bridge the worlds of the trees and of the sun; the bird is bound to the tree, and so on. Even if I refer here, for the sake of the explanation, to trees, sun and bird, these cannot be considered as types or species, since there are not fixed essences of a constant invariable nature. On the contrary, they only exist in relation to the shamans' experience. This explains the crucial interconnected aspect of the drawing: worlds are not permanent entities; they do not, per se, stand autonomously but rather depend on the shamans' engagement and relationship to them. The shamans reveal these worlds by experiencing them, actualizing them throughout their lived interaction. In doing so, they appropriate a positioning among the many existing ones, literally incarnating these worlds (Stolze de Lima 2002).

Consider, as an example, the sun in the drawing, which is inhabited: Cesar explains that this person, the

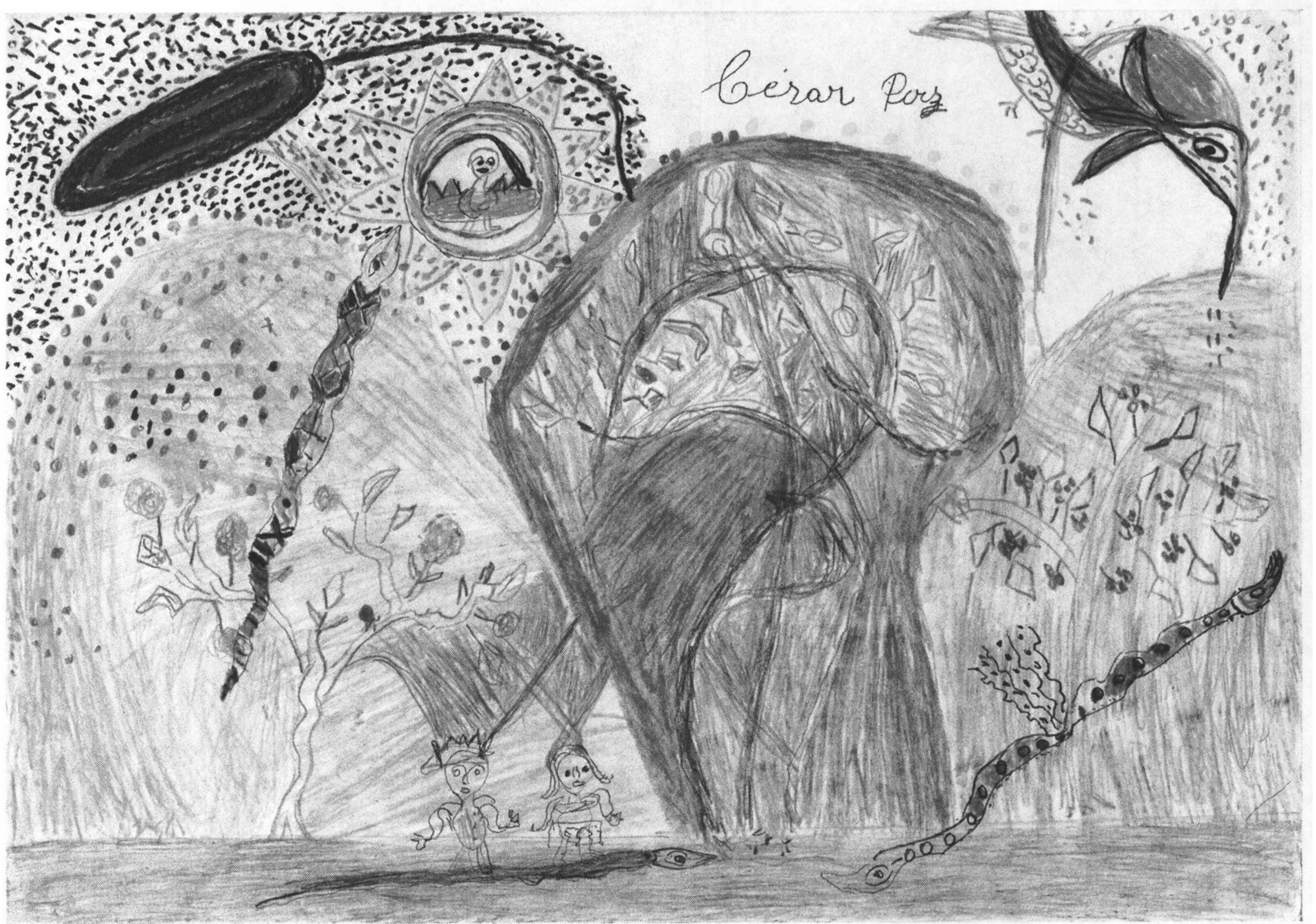

Figure 1: Shaman Cesar's drawing of an *ayahuasca* journey depicting different tree worlds. Copyright A-M Colpron, 2000.

sun's person, is equally himself. We can understand this statement if we take into account that Cesar is living the sun's experience through the sun's own standpoint; in other words, Cesar is personifying the sun. Cesar also incarnates the trees, boas and bird, which are likewise peopled or, said otherwise, people in themselves, commonly named *ibo*, a term more or less translatable as *masters*. This concept does not refer so much to the idea of *spirits*, in the common usage of the term, since the masters are not characterized by immateriality. We can take the example of the boas, considered as the masters of lakes and rivers. Boas often appear to those uninitiated into shamanism in their animal form or in the shape of packet boats or large whirlpools. If the shaman succeeds in *subjectivizing* these masters—that is to say, seeing them as people, decorated in sumptuous clothes whose beautiful designs recall the skin of the boa—this is not because they have the gift to render visible any kind of spiritual, invisible and hidden manifestation. Rather, it is because they have learned to embody the particular standpoint of the boas.

Encountering the masters of lakes and rivers in the form of subjects—that is to say, as adorned people rather than in their *objectivized* form, as a simple whirlpool or boat—does not depend, therefore, on any intrinsic attributes of these entities such as material/immaterial, natural/spiritual, object/subject. It depends, rather, on the shaman's capacity to incorporate the masters' experience. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2009:25) suggests, Amazonian shamanism comprises the polar opposite of the objectivist epistemology encouraged by Western modernity. For us, knowing is objectivizing: what cannot be objectivized remains unreal or abstract. The shamans, for they part, are moved by the opposite ideal: for them, knowing is personifying, adopting the standpoint of what has to be known, living the experience of the knowing subjects (2009:25).

This ability is difficult to acquire and implies a long process of initiation in which the shamans must, above

Figure 2: Shaman Justina's drawing of an ayahuasca session depicting the water-loving *bobinsana* tree world. Copyright A-M Colpron, 2000.

all, radically transform their everyday life. The initiates no longer socialize with their own group, no longer eat the typical diet and no longer pursue their usual quotidian activities. Instead, they immerse themselves in the way of being, the habitus of the entity with which they wish to be familiarized. We can take the example of a large, thorny tree. The shamans would isolate themselves in the forest, the tree's domain, impregnate themselves with its bark, leaves, scent and taste through baths and infusions; they would remain immobile as long as possible and consume mainly large amounts of tobacco, gradually riding themselves of their human customs and odours to acquire the tree's ethos.

The more this symbiotic relation is stimulated, the more the shamans incorporate the experience of the tree. This process is facilitated through the use of hallucinogens, such as ayahuasca, which can be considered "the basic instrument of shamanic technology, being used as a kind of visual prosthesis" (Viveiros de Castro 2007:62). By repeatedly ingesting the drug, the shamans see the inhabitants of the tree, insects or birds as people; the thorns are no longer simply thorns but defensive weapons, and the flowers are now jewellery. Since they are impregnated with the tree, the shamans also see themselves adorned with these weapons and ornaments: these are their shamanic powers that will allow them to access the tree's world. However, this potential is never fully acquired, since the odour and taste of the tree fade over time, and the items become worn out. The shamans then have to renew the practice of commensality and share the tree's habitus to be able, once again, to access this tree-becoming.

The drawing made by the shaman Justina (Figure 2) depicts a shamanic session in which Justina visits the universe of the water-loving *bobinsana* tree.[9] We see the tree in question, tied to an animal, a water horse, in turn tied to a boat, a clock and a chapel. All these shamanic helpers have been contacted, thanks to the tree, and all are different manifestations of it. We shall not be surprised that these manifestations are not restricted to a "natural" order, since the reference here is not to nature but to society: the world of the tree is, just like that of the Shipibo-Conibo, populated by Indians, Incas and Whites with the forests, modern towns and machines. But, since the shaman experiences this society via the habitus of the tree in question, everything that seems familiar becomes infinitely different.

A series of transmutations of standpoints take place between the shaman and the tree, allowing her to actualize the tree's world to become, herself, a manifestation of the tree. Justina has drawn herself as an anaconda—one of the tree's incarnations, as well as, we can recall, the master of lakes and rivers—but this transformation is not total, since Justina remains simultaneously human. The process is akin to a play of mirrors in which the shaman partially transforms into an anaconda to be able, in turn, to transform other entities into people. If we observe the drawing closely, we can see that the boat has eyes and a mouth; hence the boat is personified, and likewise the chapel is inhabited. Explaining her drawing to me, Justina said that all these helpers are equally herself. She thus embodies the masters of the tree just as the masters of the tree embody her. This is not merely a form of imitation, nor merely a metaphor, since, with the help of ayahuasca, the shaman actualizes something else entirely: neither simply human, nor tree, nor anaconda but something among all of them. The shaman embodies interspecificity, allowing her to perform her shamanic mediations.

Things become further complicated since all these manifestations of the tree embodied by the shaman are equally worlds in themselves: the water horse is a world,

just like the boat, the chapel and the clock. Thanks to the processes of commensality with a single riverside tree, the shaman can shift between multiple dimensions and successively become a water horse, a boat, a chapel, and so on. Moreover, each of these worlds refers in turn to other worlds, which refer to other worlds in an endless series of entanglements. This fractal ontology does not imply a part/whole relationship because, when apprehended from the inside, these worlds are—just like the tree world—populated with Indians, Whites, forests and towns. However, although each world may seem a replica of the other, that is not so, since each one is actualized differently, experienced through the alterity of the horse, the boat or the clock. It is because the shaman lives each of these universes that she knows it differs from the others.

The drawing by this shaman therefore takes us much further than a simple split between a natural and unitary world, the same for everyone, versus an imaginary and supernatural world peopled by invisible entities. The problem in assuming a unified nonhuman domain is that it only reproduces an inverted mirror of a unitary natural world. Rather than alluding to a fictive or transcendent universe, an invisible and absolute reality lurking behind a natural and concrete façade, the multiplicity of worlds is immanent and revealed when experienced by shamans (Viveiros de Castro 2007). Therefore, instead of talking in terms of the "imaginary," the complexity of this ontology seems to be echoed more effectively by the "virtual," in the sense of a potentiality that may become actualized.[10] Since every phenomenon is a potential world that is disclosed only when lived as such, the shaman's "experiential knowledge" (Gow 2006:222) proves more decisive than any cosmological dogma (Viveiros de Castro 2009:22).

Subjectivations

The previous examples involved trees, sun and boas, but since the shamans can choose to incorporate the experience of any phenomenon, they are interested even in those elements we conceive as simple objects. Everything for shamans can be a virtual world; every relation can potentially become social—the most powerful shamans being precisely those capable of subjectivizing any encounter (Vilaça 2005). That is why some illiterate Shipibo-Conibo shamans include written texts in their shamanic initiations: the shaman Lucio wraps the pot he uses to prepare ayahuasca with old illustrated newspapers, thereby impregnating himself with their knowledge and accessing their urban universe, populated with buildings and cars; the shaman Artemio makes similar use of the Bible and includes some saints among his shamanic helpers (who, rather than adhering to a Judeo-Christian morality of good and evil, respond to the shaman's combative aims).

Motors, batteries and transformers are also very popular among the Shipibo-Conibo shamans since they allow the experimentation of motive and electric forces, highly valued in shamanic mediations. For example, the shaman Justina explains that when she takes ayahuasca, her body transforms into a machine, a powerful force that allows her to extract the sickness. She describes her body being literally connected via cables to the world of the battery and then to the body of the patient, thereby becoming a kind of transformer allowing the force from one to circulate to the other. As I was recording Justina's shamanic songs, she also told me that she knew the world of the tape recorder, which enables her to retain an impressive repertoire of shamanic songs and prevents her of any memory loss.

From these examples we can see that shamans are interested as much in trees as in texts or manufactured goods, since all allow them to incorporate—as long as they follow the norms of commensality—specific potentialities, such as the attractive force of magnets, the knowledge of books or the resistance of iron. In another drawing made by the shaman Justina (Figure 3), we can also see how saint, angel and machines are combined, all of them being simultaneously included in shamanic mediations. Following an entirely shamanic logic, Western technologies and religious influences are thus appropriated in the same way—as subjects of knowledge (Colpron 2012).

To facilitate my explanation, I have compartmentalized forest knowledge, such as trees, anacondas and lakes, and Western knowledge, newspapers, Bible and modern objects. It is essential to remember, though, that this opposition does not correspond to the standpoint of shamans, for whom the forest encompasses all forms of knowledge. A shaman can choose to be initiated directly through a machine, which is a universe in itself, but he or she can also access the world of the machine by resorting to a tree, since forest knowledge is extremely hi-tech.[11] Several shamans described the masters of the ayahuasca vine, like Western doctors, kitted out with smocks, stethoscopes and cutting-edge medical equipment. These medical experts assist the shamans during their ayahuasca sessions and allow them to provide treatment worthy of a hospital with a surgical theatre, X-rays and all.

But while the forest enables access to knowledge we consider Western, the opposite does not occur: the objects derived from towns (machines, Bibles, newspapers) do not transmit forest knowledge. Shamans

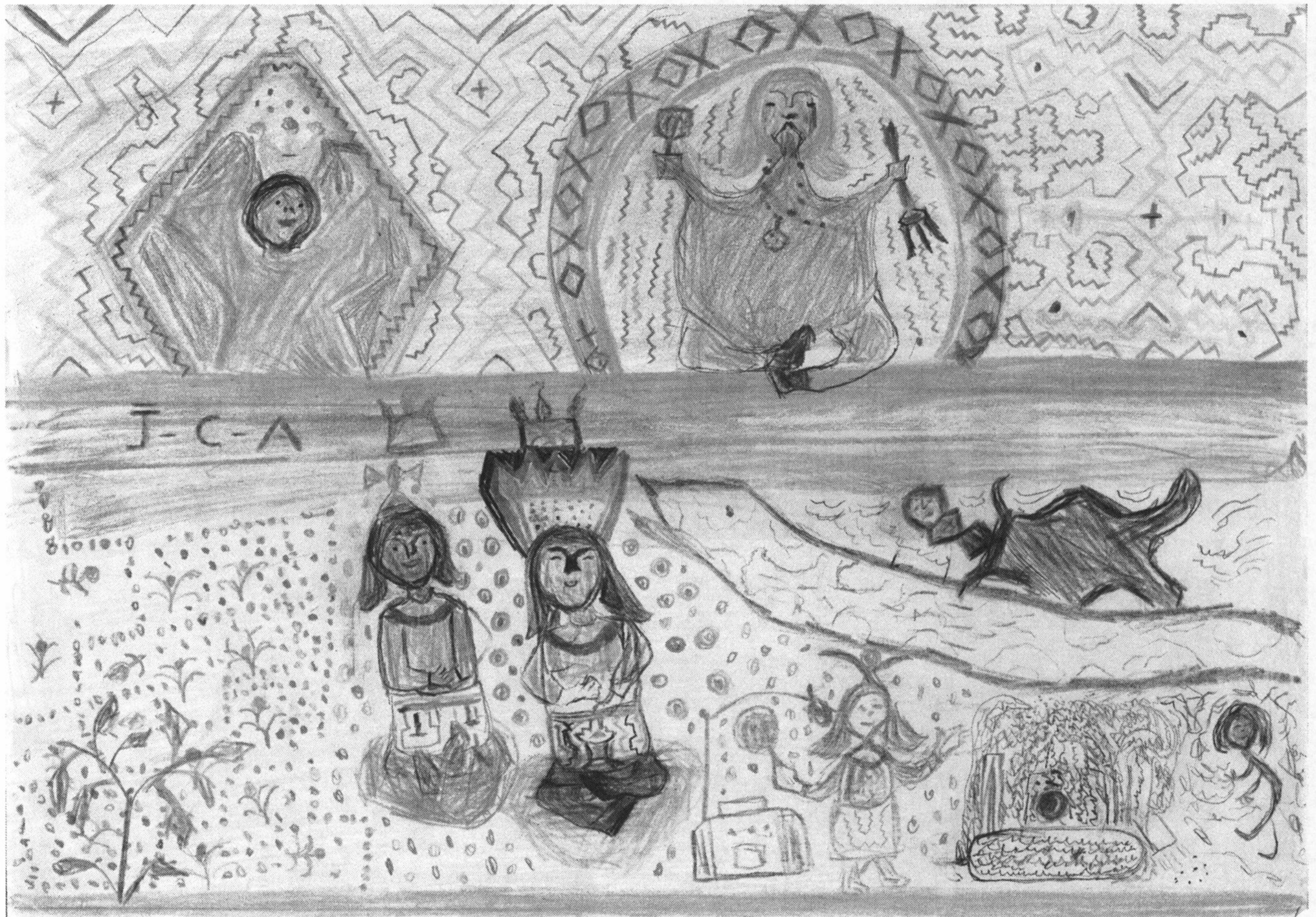

Figure 3: Shaman Justina's drawing of an ayahuasca session, depicting a saint, an angel and machines. Copyright A-M Colpron, 2000.

may sometimes choose to be initiated directly through these objects but only because, in these cases, initiation is judged to be less restrictive and dangerous than forest initiation. The asymmetry posed by myths—where the forest encompasses all forms of knowledge—means that the Shipibo-Conibo shamans, in this sense, have nothing to envy to the West.

Conclusion

We return then to my initial question: why had something I had presumed to be problematic—the crisis that contact with the West must have inevitably provoked in shamanic practice—not been so for the Shipibo-Conibo shamans? I have deliberately approached the question by exploring Shipibo-Conibo ontology as a legitimate research object and not as a simple set of supernatural beliefs. This latter approach, I defended, would have only reduced the shamans' experience of contact to my own Western idea of it. The purpose of this article was, on the contrary, to illustrate how Shipibo-Conibo shamans experience contact differently, since they enact very different lived worlds. I have therefore suggested that, while we, as Westerners, tend to refer to (1) a linear temporality, the history of the past insofar as it reflects real and concrete facts, which results (2) from a cosmology where the world is considered unitary, all of it regulated by the same laws, the Shipibo-Conibo shamans pose the question of contact in other terms; for them (1) temporality seems to be experienced through the circular time of their myths, and (2) the multiplicity of worlds and potential subjectivities render possible different enactments or realities. What are the implications of these differences?

From our Western perspective, the persistence and expansion of Shipibo-Conibo shamanism after contact can be attributed to its timeless capacity to feed on difference and absorb alterity (Erikson 1996). Since the shamans specialize in mediating among different worlds, shamanism becomes the prism through which contact is experienced (Vilaça 2000). This seems to explain the

shamanism's vitality in the context of increased relations with Western representatives: shamans become crucial mediators in the interactions with the worlds of Whites. It then becomes understandable why more intense contact with the Western world has only multiplied the number of Shipibo-Conibo shamans and expanded their shamanic practice.

However, following the Shipibo-Conibo shamans' standpoint, contact is not a novelty and Whites are not entirely alien, their knowledge having been encompassed by the forest since mythical times. Consequently, if the shamans are interested in the worlds of Whites, this is not to acquire just any kind of unfamiliar knowledge, but rather—just as they do with trees—to immerse themselves in another subject position to incorporate a specific understanding or potentiality. Shamans seek to encompass multiple subjectivities to actualize their role as "cosmopolitical diplomats." I stress, it is not merely an appropriation of representations and, thus, not simply a mimetic relation but the experiencing of another way of being or, better said, of a way of *becoming*, since shamans embody another ontological experience. This is why shamanic initiations require symbiotic behavioural practices that affect everyday life: it is only through these lived experiences that shamans acquire the multiple positioning indispensable to their shamanic mediations. Therefore shamanism does not imply the idea of "believing" but rather the practice of getting immersed—shamans incarnating and personifying different subjects of inquiry (Stolze de Lima 2002; Viveiros de Castro 2007).

That the shamans refer to the worlds of the Whites in the same way as the forest worlds may seem fairly odd from a Western point of view. However, this makes sense if we take into account that, for the shamans, the multiplicity of worlds is not imaginary and transcendent—these concepts being meaningless when a fixed unitary world is not the scale of measure—but rather immanent to every phenomenon. Since everything can allow a different positioning and world enactment, becoming White in the same way as becoming a tree comprises different manners of embodying subjectivities. Potential worlds are disclosed only when experienced by shamans and, as a consequence, any cosmological doctrine loses its pertinence vis-à-vis the shamans' lived experiences. In light of this experiential knowledge where worlds are revealed only when lived out, our abstract Western theories of the "illusory representations" cast upon an "unchanging nature" appear, in turn, very strange.

The lived multiverse of the shamans forces us to problematize our common way of depicting shamanism in terms of "belief" or "worldview." Shamanism cannot be apprehended as "a cosmovision" or as "a cultural representation" of the world, since these conceptualizations implicitly refer to a shared *nature*, while shamans' do not. The alternative proposed here, that shamanism acknowledges the idea of multiple worlds, implies much more than a question of rhetoric. Since it challenges our familiar naturalistic theories, this approach involves a kind of effectiveness just as shamanism does. If the shamans' multiverse really permeates our thoughts—instigating a kind of anthropological becoming in which we seek to mediate different ontological experiences—this would allow us to envision a different anthropological collaboration where shamans would not simply be adjusted to our theories but would effectively affect our anthropological writings. Rather than simple objects of inquiry "good to think about," shamans would then become real subjects of a dialogue "good to think with" (Stengers 2008). Taken as serious interlocutors, shamans can only lead us to learn from difference and to think differently, thus intellectually stimulating our own attempts in mediating virtual and possible worlds.

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Notes

1 The purpose of this article is not to review the literature on the topic of shamanism and contact, nor to partake in the anthropological debates about myth and history or reality and fiction. It is rather to engage in a specific and focused manner with the literature on "cosmopolitics." The guiding question informing this research can be read as follows: what are the implications of seriously taking into account the shamans' idea of "worlds-making"? The challenge is to provide an ethnographic account of shamanism without falling into Western conceptualizations of "cosmovision," "belief system," "cultural representation," "symbolism" and so forth. Ultimately, these categories only lead us back to our own ontology of a shared natural world. The authors mainly referenced are the ones who introduced the ideas of "multiverse" and ontological difference and thus who inspired the following account of Shipibo-Conibo shamanism.

2 Hallucinogenic vine (*banisteriopsiscaapi*) used by shamans of the Western Amazon.

3 On this matter, Poirier (2005:59) exemplifies eloquently how her Western ontology makes her experience of the wind very different than the one of her Kukatja aboriginal friend: they lived and felt the strength of the wind at the same time but for Poirier it was an unpleasant and intrusive experience, while for her friend it was protecting and nourishing.

4 This is the predominant view outside the field of specialized anthropologists.

5 Kohn (2007:121) mentions a similar phenomenon among the Runa of the Upper Amazon: "although demons … are described as wearing priestly habits, modern missionaries in the region no longer wear this."
6 The periodic messianic movements that arose in the region since colonial times can also explain the Inca's persistence as an influential shamanic helper (Morin 1976).
7 For more information about this Western history of contact, I refer the reader to Colpron (2012), the purpose of the present article being to explore the Shipibo-Conibo shamans' experience of contact. Similar ethnographic data is further developed in the previous article but is here considered into a new light.
8 The Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa (1998) conveys a similar idea: "The Whites were created by Omama in our forest, but he expelled them because he was afraid of their lack of wisdom and because they were dangerous to us!"
9 *Calliandraangustifolia.*
10 For further information on the concept "virtual," see Viveiros de Castro (2009) and Deleuze and Guattari (1980).
11 For other Amazonian examples of this phenomenon, see Townsley (1993); Chaumeil (2000); Kohn (2007); and Cesarino (2008).

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