The changing understanding of the Huaorani shaman's art

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Abstract
The Huaorani live in the Ecuadorian part of the Amazon region. Their culture differs from others of the region in many aspects; in recent decades, it has been affected by changes that were inevitable after their official contact with Western culture in 1958. Drawing on fieldwork with an Ecuadorian Huaorani clan, this paper explores some difficulties in understanding the shaman's practices in this small scale society. The argument is that the accounts given by the researchers during last fifty years differ from each other, and that this makes almost impossible to talk about "traditional" and "contemporary" Huaorani shamanism at present.

KEYWORDS: indigenous shamanism, Amazonian culture, Huaorani

Introduction
Today, the meaning of the word *shamanism* depends on who is using the term. There are almost as many varieties of the term as there are researchers. Some of them would agree that traditional shamanism still requires research, as it is still not easy to comprehend. It is possible that in the case of traditional shamanism we should be talking about *shamanisms*, as they change and differ from each other.

Methodology
This paper explores the art of the shaman from a small community of the Huaorani[1] tribe that lives in the eastern part of Ecuador. It is based on data collected during fieldwork conducted in the Huaorani group between 2007 and 2012, and on scientific literature. The data was verified by anthropological interviews and by participant as well as non-participant observations that were in turn extended by information collected from local informants and cultural experts.

[1] The word *Huaorani* (people) is the plural form of the noun *Huao* (man) in Huao Terero language.

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Cultural background

The Huaorani live in the westernmost part of the Amazon basin, relatively close to the Andes, in Ecuador. Researchers are not in agreement concerning the origin of this group. Some of them have suggested that the Huaorani are part of the Zaparo tribe[2] that had separated and adapted to life in the depth of the forest[3] (Zeglier-Otero 2004: 30). Other researchers have stated that the lack of stories about migration in Huaorani oral traditions excludes any possibility of definite determination of their origin (Yost 1981: 97).

The language used by this group, Huao Terero, presents additional difficulty. It is an isolated language, and it does not have any resemblance to other languages of the area (in spite of the long-term contact and trade that Huaorani were doing with the neighbouring tribes). There is an additional difficulty in the interpretation that points to the hypothesis of the Huaorani arriving to the eastern part of Ecuador from an unknown direction in the middle of the 19th century.

There are still many shortcomings in knowledge about the tribe. The Huaorani made official, peaceful contact with the outside world in 1958. Of course, earlier they had known of the presence of Mestizo and white people in the area and were trading (and fighting) with other tribes, but every stranger was considered an enemy; therefore, there were no closer contacts with people other than from their tribe (Rival 2002: 46–67).

The Huaorani have existed in the Ecuadorian social structure only for about fifty years, but at this point it is already impossible to reconstruct their culture from the time before the contact. Researchers have collected various amounts of information over these fifty years (Rival 2002: Davies 1996: Zeglier-Otero 2004; Robarchek & Robarchek 1998: Yost 1981; Cabodevilla 1999), but some of it was inconsistent or applicable to only some of the clans.

The Huaorani are tropical forest horticulturalists as they grow fruits and vegetables in small fields outside the villages. They grow mostly *chonta* palms,[4] manioc (*Manihot esculenta*) and plantains (*Musa paradisiaca*). Some food is also gathered from the forest. Formerly, it was thought that indigenous peoples were only exploiting the forest, but it has been proven that some of the trees cannot reproduce without human intervention, which leads to the conclusion that the natives actually "farm" the tropical forest and plant useful species of trees and other plants (Rival 1998: 635–52).

The Huaorani also used to hunt using blowpipes with curare-treated darts and spears. Hunting equipment was made of chonta palm wood, which is exceptionally durable and hard. A meat diet was supplemented with fruits and vegetables; a meatless meal was and still is considered not to be a proper meal at all. Of course, today the Huaorani also eat different Western food, such as rice, which is highly popular in Ecuador, and other products that were not available to them before.

[2] Zaparo live to this day in the eastern part of Ecuador. Some time ago they were neighbours of the Huaorani from the western side. Single people speaking Zapara language live in Quichua villages (Paymal, N., 1993, p.186).

[3] The Zaparos' villages were located on the river banks while the Huaorani's were on the hilltops, far from the rivers and later roads.

[4] There are two species of palm that are called chonta in the Amazon: chontaduro (*Bactris gasipaes*) and chonta pambil (*Iriartea deltoidea*). Their wood is very hard and natives use it in various ways.

As mentioned before, the Huaorani villages were located deep in the forest. Today, due to the need of communication, villages are often set next to the river or the airstrip (or both). One village typically consists of one clan. Formerly the clan (*nanicabo*) occupied one house – a five meters high building, made out of long poles covered with palm leaves. Members of the clan are united by blood ties and social commitments, for example food sharing. Food is shared within the nanicabo first and then any leftovers are shared with other clans.

Sources are most concerned about the tribe's war practices (e.g. Robarchek & Robarchek 1998) due to the importance of this aspect in the Huaorani life. Warfare, blood vendettas and revenge for the death of the relatives were quite frequent in their history. Today, it remains the theme of a majority of the stories and memories because the Huaorani do not wage war in its traditional sense anymore, except one clan that has refused any contact with Western world (Cabodevilla 2008; Wierucka 2010: 292).

Changes in many aspects of the Huaorani life took place mostly due to the arrival of the missionaries to the area and to historical events that spread throughout the Amazon region. Natives suffered from the moment Spanish conquerors set their foot on this land. First, the diseases that indigenous people were not immune to, later the exploitation, slavery and planned genocide. The Huaorani have had their share of all of the above, especially of the activity of rubber merchants working on the *haciendas*, who often seized indigenous people and forced them to work. Many Huaorani died in the process.

The situation became even worse after the discovery of oil in the Amazon. Today the natives fight an unequal war with the oil companies (Ziegler-Otero 2004). The activity of major companies in the Amazon also leads to long-lasting changes in tropical forest environment and Ecuador's unique biodiversity is especially vulnerable. It is quite common to hear about threats that the tropical forest faces, yet at the same time we forget about the people who actually live in the forest and are part of it. More than any other indigenous group, the Huaorani are threatened by deforestation as their whole way of life is still connected with the forest. There are about 1500 Huaorani today, and the number is increasing; there were only about 600 Huaorani in 1990 (Rival 2000: 244).

Social structure

In order to discuss the role of the shaman in the Huaorani society and changes in his art, the surrounding social structure should be discussed. According to the Huaorani, people are first divided into two groups: *huaorani*, which includes people born from Huaorani parents and speaking the Huao Terero language and *cohuori*, which means *strangers* and includes all people coming from outside of the tribe despite their attitude (formerly the term also included spouses and children from mixed marriages). Inside the *huaorani* category (the term itself means *people*), a few subgroups are found, e.g. *huarani* (others, which includes Huaorani coming from other ancestors) or *arorani* (includes all Huaorani that can be married to one another).

There is no hierarchy inside the huaorani group. There is also no chief or any other person that would hold power over the rest. There are some people in the clans that are

more respected (like a shaman or an experienced warrior), but there is no power connected with it. Huaorani society is egalitarian, and everybody is equal in all aspects of life. It also means that everybody is independent and responsible for oneself and is treated like that by other members of the clan.

Traditionally the status of the shaman also was not connected with any power. It has changed slightly over the years, but the practice and the art of the shamans have changed also when compared with the knowledge previously gathered by other researchers.

Change triggers

The main changes in the Huoarani culture come from three sources: the activity of the missionaries, contact with other groups, and the activity of the oil companies in the area. Some of them might not affect the practice of shamanism directly. Nevertheless, many aspects of the culture have changed because of these triggers, which also resulted in shamanism changing.

The missionaries had the main influence on the religious life of the tribe. Sources usually just state that the first peaceful contact with the Huoarani was made in 1958, and it sounds quite straightforward. Nevertheless, closer study of the Huaorani history reveals the circumstances of this "peaceful contact". It has been described in detail many times (Ziegler-Otero 2004: 51–68; Wallis 1980; Cabodevilla 1999: 318–26; Davis 1996: 257–67), so a general outline will suffice here.

Protestant missions have been present in the Amazon since the Second World War and the peak of their activities occurred in the 1950s. Conversion of the "savages" became an objective worth the highest sacrifice. The year 1956 was a crucial one: after finding the Huaorani villages from the air and "softening" the people with gifts dropped from the planes, five American missionaries landed on the river bank in the Huaorani territory (Cabodevilla 1999: 319–32; Robarchek & Robarchek 1998: 152; Ziegler-Otero 2004: 61). It was the final stage of "operation Auca", which aimed to "civilise Indians".

All five missionaries were speared to death by the Huaorani. Their bodies were found on the river bank. The story had wide publicity, especially in the United States where the missionaries gained the status of martyrs. The direct outcome of these events was "peaceful contact" made two years later, in 1958, by the Summer Institute of Linguistics.[5] The main activists were two women connected with the dead missionaries, one of them was a widow, the other a sister.

Most popular stories about these events do not give the whole view. In the 1950s, the Huaorani met with hostility directed at them from anybody who came to their territory. Many members of the group were killed by poachers, loggers, gold diggers and

[5] Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) today is known under the name SIL International. It came to existence in the United States in year 1934 with the purpose of preparing missionaries for work with indigenous people. It is Christian organisation that aims to study and document less known languages of the world, but the main activity of the organisation is missionary and because of this the first text that is usually translated onto indigenous languages is the Bible. SIL operates in many countries; in many of them, it has been expelled due to its destructive influence on indigenous cultures.

rubber tappers. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the long lasting isolation of the tribe suddenly came to an end and at the time any stranger was considered an enemy. The Huaorani were not treated with much decency by other people; therefore, their hostility is understandable. Later activities of the cohuori did not improve the situation much; organising the Protectorate in 1969 and the resettlement of most of the clans from the area had a destructive influence on the culture. During those times, the activities of SIL brought much damage to the tribe (including diseases and poverty, enabling the entry of oil companies to the area, the disappearance of some traditions and so on); at the same time, researchers clearly state that one of the outcomes of the missionaries presence was the cessation of the warfare between the Huaorani clans (Yost 1994: 351; Robarchek & Robarchek 1998: 151–63).

The activity of missionaries undoubtedly influenced the traditional religious practices: a majority of Huaorani are Christians now and shamanism can be found mostly in clans that do not live within the Huaorani Territory (created in 1996).

The history of oil extraction and its influence on indigenous people of the Ecuadorian Amazon have also been analysed (Ziegler-Otero 2004: 68–73; Robarchek & Robarchek 1998: 95–6; Rival 2000: 254–61; Cabodevilla 1999: 283–304, 411–38; Dematteis 2008). The problem started in 1937 when the oil reservoirs were discovered in Ecuador. Since then, the situation of indigenous people has been deteriorating. Oil companies were buying subsequent pieces of land, contaminating the forest and water with petroleum waste. The road was built right into the heart of the Huaorani territory, which enabled the export of crude oil out of the forest, but at the same time it resulted in the arrival of many strangers into the Huaorani land. An important moment for the tribe throughout the fight with oil companies was the creation of their own Organizacion de las Nacionalidades Indigenas de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (ONHAE), which focuses on negotiations with the government and oil companies in order to protect indigenous rights (Ziegler-Otero 2004).

Traditions of Huaorani shamanism

The data collected by researchers gives an unclear picture of the Huaorani shamanism. The description below is a compilation of different papers (mainly Yost 1981; 1994; Rival 2002; and Robarchek & Robarchek 1998) combined with the outcome of my research done in the Huaorani group (2007–2012). Nevertheless, the data is inconsistent and leaves much for further exploration.

Many researchers write about the Huaorani shamanism at some point, but (as mentioned above) their accounts differ. One thing that is consistent in all of the reports is the fact that traditional shamanism mostly had to do with jaguar spirits. They were helping people when asked for it by the shaman. The so-called "jaguar father" is chosen by jaguar spirits (when he is in mature age), which enables him to communicate with them (Rival 2002: 79; Yost 1981: 353). The jaguar spirits chose the man of whom they wanted to be "sons". They came to him in his dreams and then, after some time, they adopted him as their "father" (Rival 2002: 79).

Usually, the chosen man has to have near death experience in his childhood or adolescence. After contact with the jaguar spirits, he is called *menye waempo* and his wife,

who becomes "jaguar mother", is called *menye baada* (Rival gives the name of *meñera* that is supposed to come from the word *miñe* (jaguar) and *bara* (mother); 2002: 198n.12). They are "jaguar parents" and, as Yost puts it, they can send the jaguar spirits in order to find the game or check on the welfare of the relatives who live further away (1994: 353). This type of a shaman is described in most sources.

Some sources, however, also mention the other type of a shaman, called *ydo*, who actually acts as a sorcerer. I feel that *sorcerer* is not an appropriate name for any shamanistic practice; nevertheless, this designation is used by the Robarcheks (1998: 112) when describing the practices of an ydo. He is supposed to bring sickness and death to other people of the tribe using his spirit helpers, called *wenae* (Yost 1981: 113). Only the ydo himself is able to undo the damage he has done. People fear the ydo; therefore, he practices his art in secrecy. If he agreed to cure somebody who was supposedly hurt by an ydo, it would mean that it was in fact himself who hurt the person. Confirming his identity would result in his death; his tribesmen would kill him out of fear. The ydo is supposed to be responsible for most sicknesses and also sudden deaths or those that cannot be explained.

The identity of the menye waempo does not have to be concealed, and he can practice his art openly. People can express their gratitude towards the jaguar father, but at the same time he does not have a significant role in the group. His position is not connected with any power and, except his ability to communicate with the spirits of the jaguars, he is a regular member of the clan.

Both types of shamans drink *ayahuasca* (a brew of *Banisperiopsis caapi*) that in the Huao Terero language is called *mii*. The *menye waempo* drinks it only once, at the beginning of his practice, and the ydo drinks it every time he wants to perform his art (Robarchek & Robarchek 1998: 112). Both shamans also use chants in order to perform, and each of them has their own tune.

Shamanistic practice and art

My research done in one of the Huaorani clans brings some different data to that collected by researchers in previous years. This may be due to changes that the Huaorani culture has undergone over the previous decades.

The shaman in this particular group is called *miñe*. He claims that there are only two miñe left. The word meñera, as described by L. Rival (2002: 198n.12), according to my informants is not the designation of the shaman, but of the state of connection with the jaguar powers.

The miñe listens to the jaguars; when they are close, he chants in order to get into the trance that enables him to travel with the spirits. The shaman usually travels on the shoulder of a bigger jaguar, and a smaller one is always around. He cannot refuse to meet the jaguar spirits when he feels the power rise in him and feels the urge to chant in order to follow the jaguars. The journey with them might last a long time; afterwards, the shaman can remember very little of it or sometimes even nothing at all. The only limits he talks about during his trance are that people cannot ask him to see the dead or to travel to other villages to check on the relatives, because the shaman could kill other people while in the meñera state. However, he can travel anywhere and can find the needed place or game or

to find out what is going to happen. He can stop this journey at any point by drinking some water, after which he finds himself back in his hammock.

The shaman's services to the people are connected mostly with healing. For this, he usually uses herbs, so he does not have to go into a trance, but there are some sicknesses that can be cured only with the help of the jaguar spirits (these are mostly fever or vomiting). The miñe can cure any physical illness; he never uses mii for his practices.

Interestingly, a shaman in this group was not "called" by the jaguar spirits, as mentioned by other researchers. His powers were given to him by his grandfather; in turn, he will transfer his powers to other clan members. First, it will be his son-in-law and his daughter-in-law, and later they will transfer powers to shaman's grandson. The latter is too young to undertake the shamanistic responsibilities, but his uncle (the shaman's son-in-law) and his aunt (the shaman's daughter-in-law) will keep the power until he is ready. All three of them had near-death experiences as tradition demands. During their illness, the shaman prepared special herbal decoction that purified them. While they were healing, he told them that when they would be healthy again, his powers would stay with them. In a way, they already have the powers now, only they cannot use them yet. It will change when the shaman dies, but it is also subject to conditions: they will be able to use the power, but they have to be sure they can transfer their power to somebody else, and that they can easily transfer it to the particular, chosen person. The shaman emphasised that the power can be transferred by mistake while healing a sick person; thus, his successors have to make sure they have control over it. The conscious transfer has to be done in a relaxed atmosphere, and the person that is about to obtain the power has to have faith and trust towards the shaman. As the shaman put it, there is no space for anger.

When the current shaman passes away, all three of the chosen people can use the power, but they can also decide not to act upon it and only one or two of them can practice using it.

The power of the shaman is connected with the jaguar spirits, so the shaman has already given one of his jaguars to his grandson (which does not imply that he travels with only one now; he still works with the both of them).

As my informants pointed out, the distinction between the miñe and ydo is still valid. The power of the miñe is supposed to be greater than that of the other one. There is also the notion that the miñe does not use ayahuasca at all. The shaman I interviewed mentioned that he tried to work with it, but it did not have much influence on him and did not help him with the healing of the sick people. Using ayahuasca makes the miñe angry, and then he cannot practice his art in peace.

The shaman also recalled the myth about the appearance of the ayahuasca vine in the world. He told the story about the family that was collecting the nests of oropendolas.[6] People climbed the vines up the tree in order to reach the nests. At the end of the work, the vine was cut, but one man was left behind on the tree. He was worried that he would not be

[6] Oropendolas are different species of the *Icteridae* family. Their nests are basket-shaped and hang from the ends of the branches of the tall trees.

able to get down and then a person appeared on the sky talking to him. The person turned into a boa, and it wanted to help him to get down. The boa came closer and arranged his body down the tree trunk so the man could get to the ground. The boa said that the man has to cut its head when he reaches the ground and that it will start to bleed. The boa ordered the man to come back later to the tree as a good vine would appear out of its blood. When the man came back later, the ayahuasca vine was growing on the tree trunk.

The Huaorani culture gives the account of the ydo shamans who brings damage and death to the people, and they work exclusively under the influence of ayahuasca. The recalled myth also portrays the damage and death that was brought upon the boa (on its own demand) so that the new vine could appear. There is the connection between the practices of the ydo and the mythological ayahuasca vine origin; as the man in the myth inflicted death to the boa in order to gain the vine, the ydo inflicts illness or death on his people in order to gain benefits.

People in the village where the fieldwork was carried out were aware of the presence of the ydo in the other village. His name was known, and they were afraid of him. They also pointed out that (as stated by some authors, e.g. Yost 1981: 113) nobody would dare to attempt to kill the ydo. They fear him too much; he would probably know beforehand that the killing was planned and would take necessary precautions.

Traditionally Huaorani shamans did not have any power in the society, but the new reality forced the current one to take the initiative. Now he acts as the clan's leader. He still cannot tell anybody what to do, but he has the authority in his clan, and the whole tribe acknowledges him as a leader for all internal affairs. His nephew undertook the role of the leader for all external affairs, but he always consults his decisions with the elders of the clan, especially with the miñe.

The shaman's new acquired power will be soon put to the test. Members of his clan usually do not undermine his decisions when they concern local schools or tourists, but the shaman planned to leave the village in which they have lived in for almost ten years. There is not much game left, and closer gardens are already almost infertile, but there also is an airstrip. Once it was illegal, today it serves as a main source of money; tourists prefer to fly to the village instead of travelling by boat for almost three days and nowadays tourists are the main source of money for the tribe. The shaman does not approve of it, and he wants to leave the village, to return to his father's land where, as he puts it, there will be nobody but the Huaorani. Lately, his plans had to change even if he is tired of the airstrip village. His people do not want him to leave, and he does not want to leave his children and grandchildren behind. They would not follow him to the forest, especially the younger generation that knows a different, modern reality. The clan would be divided, and the shaman does not want to contribute to this. However, the old way of living that is so much praised by the shaman is in contradiction with his views on the modern innovations that his clan is benefiting from. For example, electrical power was brought to the village by Municipio Aguarico in May 2012. The miñe emphasises that he very much likes the lights, that the whole village looks nice during the long evenings.

Conclusion

The outcome of my research reveals inconsistencies in the data collected by researchers over the years. Even the designation for the shaman is various in different sources. There are older texts that describe mostly the practice of two kinds of Huaorani shamans: ydo and menye waempo. For example, they appear in James Yost's text from 1981, but in the same author's text dated 1994 only one kind of shaman is mentioned: the ydo. In the book by Carolyn and Clayton Robarcheks (1998), both shamans are described (they use the word sorcerer for the ydo) and Laura Rival in her book (2002) gives the description only of the menye waempo (calling him meñera). A few other texts about the Huaorani do not mention the practice of shamanism at all. My research brings the designation of the miñe, as it was given by my informants. This raises questions about our whole understanding of shamanistic practices in Huaorani culture. What can we comprehend if even the description of the shaman is so diverse? The diversity of data makes the understanding of the shaman's practices extremely complicated and may lead a researcher to false conclusions. The interviews with the cultural informants and even with the shaman himself also raise subsequent questions; the gathered data can only relate to this one case and cannot be considered the rule for the whole tribe. The lack of a solid base of knowledge about the traditional Huaorani shamanism makes it impossible to follow all the changes that it has undergone. At the same time, it gives us some assumptions to interpret the influence of contact with the Western culture on the cultural changes of the tribe. Shamanism is one of the most crucial elements of this culture – let us hope it will be so for many years to come.

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Povzetek

Huaoraniji živijo v ekvadorskem delu amazonske regije. Njihova kultura se od ostalih kultur v regiji razlikuje v mnogih vidikih. V zadnjih desetletjih nanjo vplivajo spremembe, ki so bile neizbežne po njihovem prvem uradnem stiku z zahodno kulturo leta 1958. Prispevek, ki temelji na terenskem delu z ekvadorskim klanom Huaoranijev, proučuje nekatere težave v razumevanju šamanskih praks v tej majhni družbi. Utemeljuje, da se opisi raziskovalcev, ki so nastali v zadnjih petdesetih letih, med seboj razlikujejo in da to onemogoča obravnavo "tradicionalnega" in "sodobnega" šamanizma Huaoranijev v sedanjosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: staroselski šamanizem, amazonska kultura, Huaorani

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