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People into Ghosts: Chachi Death Rituals as Shape-Shifting

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Discussions about the importance of corporeality in lowland South American societies tend to focus on the bodies of the living, and relatively little has been written on dead bodies, or on the embodiment of the dead. In an influential article, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro contends that the fundamental distinction between the living and the dead is established through the body (1998:482). A dead person is no longer attached to a human body. Whether this implies that the dead are confined to the realm of the invisible and the immaterial remains a moot point, even though there appears to exist a tacit consensus that they are. In any case, various authors emphasize that one would be hard-pressed to find any tangible traces of the dead in everyday life. Anne Christine Taylor, for instance, writes:

It has become a commonplace of Amazonian ethnology to point out the absence in lowland societies of anything resembling ancestor cults, the shallowness of genealogical memory ... and the general scarcity of tombs or indeed of any marked spaces durably associated with the dead. Far from stressing continuity with their ancestors and enshrining their memory in names, epics or monuments, lowland Amerindians expend considerable time and ingenuity in losing their dead, forgetting their names and deeds and emphasizing their remoteness from the world of the living (1993:653).

Taylor's observation illustrates what she refers to as the "radical discontinuity" between this world and the realm of the beyond, a discontinuity found across the continent. Carneiro da Cunha was one of the first authors to highlight this feature for the Amazon basin (1978). Such discontinuity has also been reported in highland South America. Olivia Harris, for instance, asserts that in Andean cultures "... the dead are represented ... as antithetical to the living ..." (2000:35). Although this general rule has become a well-established finding of South American anthropology, it does not in itself elucidate the question of whether or not the dead have a corporeal presence. Does the "absence" of anything related to death in

everyday life necessarily imply that those who are not alive are bodiless? Is the “remoteness” of the dead adequately captured in terms of visibility and materiality? These are some of the questions I tackle below through a close examination of Chachi understandings of death, Chachi funerary rituals, and the particular role played by ghosts (*ujmu*) during the wake.¹

GHOSTS

“I am not afraid of anything ... except of the dead, perhaps.” Young Roberto remembered an occasion when he and his friends were playing football on the other side of the river. On a normal day, he would have returned to his hilltop house way before dark, but, on that particular day, he and his mates were playing for money. Being one of the team’s best players, he was urged to stay until the end. As a result, it was already pitch-dark when he finally walked back home. He suddenly noticed the presence of creatures donning white garments: *ujmu*! Without further thinking, he rushed uphill to his mother’s home.

Such anecdotes are common among the Chachi, an Amerindian group living in the northwest of Ecuador.² When I first arrived in the village of Estero Vicente, my main field site, the wife of one of the villagers had recently died. As her *ujmu*, or ghost, was still wandering around the village, her husband and children were forced to abandon the family house for several months and to move in with the widower’s mother. The *ujmu* was described to me as a human being, a Chachi, who could sometimes be seen holding a candle and passing by in a canoe on the river at nighttime. When the children from another family fell ill, this was blamed on the deceased woman’s *ujmu*. The widower knew that in order to cure the children, protect the villagers, and move back to his own house, he would need to contract a shaman, who alone could get rid of the *ujmu*. Unfortunately, he could not afford the expense. The *ujmu* of a loved one is not intrinsically bad or malicious. One man told me: “It is not that the *ujmu* is bad in itself. When it looks at its living relatives, it does so with love and affection. Even so, it causes damage and illness because everything happens the other way round with *ujmu*. If the *ujmu* likes you, you become sick. When it hates you, strangely enough, nothing happens, you are safe. This is why our shamans always try to send *ujmu* to faraway islands at sea.” The dead woman’s *ujmu* continued to haunt Estero Vicente because of her clinging love for her husband and her children.

To speak of a paranoiac fear of death among the Chachi is no exaggeration. When someone passes away, everything that was connected

to this person must be completely obliterated. The house of the deceased should be dismantled and the surviving relatives should move away and build a new house. This is how Estero Vicente came into existence some twenty years ago. Florentino, who had been living in his mother-in-law's house, decided to move away when she died, and to start a new village with relatives and neighbors. Full of fear, he demolished the dead woman's house and did away with all her belongings.³ In general, some Chachi will cut down coconut palms and other fruit trees of deceased persons, slaughter their chickens and pigs (and throw the meat away!), and part with their canoes. Personal belongings such as clothes and hammocks are buried with the corpse.⁴ As an informant put it: "We don't want anything from the deceased." A bilingual Chachi schoolteacher, who dreamt of one day writing his family's biography, once complained that he did not have a single photograph of his own grandparents, for his parents had refused to keep any such artifact. Chachi people, like many Amazonian and Andean groups, explicitly refuse to remember anything about the dead. The dead are relentlessly annihilated and systematically erased from living memory (C. Hugh-Jones 1979:109; Chaumeil 1983:227; Gow 1991:184; Taylor 1993:655; Rival 1996:91; Gray 1996:172; Conklin 2001:xxi; Carter 1968; Gose 1994:120–121; Harris 2000:34).

THE WAKE

The frightening encounters described above and the funerary games analyzed below, highlight the fact that the living are not always neatly set apart from the dead, but must deal with each other on occasion. I remember how, one afternoon in November 2003, news of the death of an elderly man from downstream triggered great commotion in Estero Vicente, where he had many relatives. That evening, all the villagers embarked in their canoes and traveled down river to take part in the wake organized in the dead man's house. Two distinct groups were clearly identifiable in the crowded house. The men congregated in one half of the house while the women and small children congregated in the other. The wake essentially consisted of games played by men who were distant relatives of the deceased.⁵ These games, as several participants emphasized, are sacred.⁶ Most games involve utterances that are meaningless in the vernacular Cha'palaa language and cannot be translated into Spanish either.

Most of the games played during the wake involve "money" transactions and the circulation of "coins" made of plantain. Many of the games involve a certain amount of physical aggression. The mood is elated, with a lot of

laughter and a great deal of shouting. The man who coordinates the wake and decides when it is time to switch to another game is called “leader of the wake” (*velui uni*), or “mother of the games” (*velui ama*). He also chooses the games and incites idle onlookers to join in by tickling them. Those who succumb to laughter are forced to play. Another of his responsibilities is to give fines (payable in plantain coins) to those who play badly, or even to whip them. The leader of the wake is usually not a close relative of the deceased, but a vague acquaintance. The close kin of the deceased, the *pemu'bulula*, do not participate in the funerary games, but spend the night wailing near the coffin, which is surrounded by candles and stands between the men and the women. Close relatives are expected to weep, grieve, and mourn, while distant relatives, friends, and neighbors must enjoy themselves. Close relatives add to the festive mood by lavishing rum and cigarettes on the others present at the wake.⁷ Participants explained to me that: “If we didn't play with the deceased and have fun, the Devil would come and do it instead of us.” Rum, cigarettes, and other goods exchanged during the wake are not free gifts, but commodities purchased with slices of plantain. Those participating in the games “buy,” while close relatives of the deceased “sell.” The “coins” accumulated through these exchanges are subsequently deposited inside the coffin.⁸

For the opening game, the players sit behind each other in a circle. A big heap of slices of plantain stands next to a blackened piece of plantain which has been carved with a face on one side only. The side with the face represents the living, the unmarked side the dead. This piece of plantain is thrown exactly like a dice, and players receive “money” when it falls face upwards. A player who lets the piece of plantain fall facedown gets slapped on his hands by the next player. The opening game finishes with a few rounds of collective “punishment.” Player A slaps as hard as he can the hands of Player B, his neighbor. Player B returns Player A's slapping before turning to Player C, and so on.

At a signal from the leader of the wake, the players then stand up, form a new circle, and play the “Fence.” Keeping close to each other and holding on tight to each other's elbows, they start hopping in a moving circle around one player, the “Cow.”⁹ In this relatively swift and rough game, the Cow must try to escape, while remaining impervious to the shower of insults coming from the Fence. When the game is over, all the players join in the chorus and sing chants containing esoteric expressions such as “*chingwalitu*,” which are endlessly repeated. Several whipping games follow. They all involve a whip made out of a plaited piece of cloth that used to belong to the deceased person.

Game participants are invited to drink heavily, and to play as hard as

they can to please the mourners. Around midnight, when it is time to play the next game—called “chicken against jaguar”—they are totally drunk. This game involves one player who is “Chicken,” one who is “Jaguar,” and a long row of players who are “Chicks.” The Chicks are asked to stand behind Chicken. The aim of the game is for Chicken to defend the Chicks from Jaguar. As the row of Chicks sways and swings, the players shout “*kililinda!*” Once in a while, Jaguar darts forward and tries to catch one of the Chicks, until they are all hunted down. Then, Jaguar and his helper dramatically “weigh” the Chicks. Jaguar, who now owns the Chicks, sells them for plantain coins that he collects in a corner of his T-shirt. Suddenly, there is great commotion: Jaguar’s money was stolen! At this moment, two new players rush in: “Policeman” on his “Horse.” In no time, Policeman identifies and arrests the thief. Jaguar’s money is recovered and distributed among the players, who use it to buy the things they need for the next games.

Other games are played (that I cannot describe here for lack of space) and then the “fish catching contest” begins. The house becomes “River,” and all those inside “Fish.” Some players, the “Fishermen,” throw a line out to the Fish. Sometimes the Fishermen hit the Fish, but sometimes the Fish may send the line back, rolling with laughter and saying: “the Fish escaped from the hook.” When a Fisherman catches a Fish, it is “weighed” and “sold.”¹⁰ Another game starts when someone suddenly climbs towards the roof and attaches a long piece of white cloth to a ridge beam, while a player underneath pulls the cloth downward. When he reaches the roof, the first man becomes a Macaw and shouts “Awaaa, awaaa!” The man who has remained on the ground underneath becomes a Royal Palm (*Roystonea spp.*). Other players transform themselves into a herd of White-lipped Peccaries.¹¹ They are soon followed by a man impersonating a Hunter, as well as by a few other men who behave as a pack of ferocious dogs. Having spotted the Hunter and the Dogs, the White-lipped Peccaries flee in a panic. Some escape by crossing the female half of the house, jumping over sleeping women and children in the process. The Hunter “hunts” by throwing little wooden sticks to the Peccaries and the Macaw. The Macaw, shot by the Hunter, falls from the Royal Palm. The Hunter sells his catch for plantain “money.”

The next—and last—game evokes the harvesting of manioc. The players sit in a long file and become “Manioc Roots.” Each of the players sits between the knees of the players behind them and holds the torso of the players in front of them, except for one player who has become a “Harvester.” The Harvester’s job consists of pulling the Manioc Roots out, an operation not as straightforward as it may seem. First, the “field”

needs to be cleared. The Harvester, armed with a machete, taps on the floor of the house right next to the row of Manioc Roots. He also “smokes out the wasps” by walking along the row again, armed with a fire-lit dried palm leaf. The Harvester then tries to pull the Manioc Roots out of the ground, one by one. The Manioc Roots resist by clinging to each other and “sinking a bit deeper into the ground.” Eventually, the Harvester ends up pulling all of the Manioc Roots out of the ground. The Harvester then “weighs” the Manioc Roots by having them do a backward somersault. The Manioc Roots are finally hauled away to form a heap, and are sold by the Harvester for plantain “money.”

At sunrise, most people return home in their canoes, while close kin and friends start preparing for the transport of the corpse to the ceremonial center, also known as “village of the dead.” Chachi ceremonial centers, which are only used on ritual occasions (weddings and funerals), consist of a church and various communal houses. No one lives there, and they remain empty for most of the year. Ceremonial centers are usually built along parts of the river where the physical properties of the landscape are reversed, for instance where there are whirlpools. In these places, the water flow is obstructed, and the current flows *the other way around*. Ordinary Chachi houses, by contrast, are built along stretches of river where the water flows normally, and the current behaves straightforwardly.

The funeral starts when the coffin is brought to the “village of the dead,” right after the night’s wake. Made out of bamboo, the coffin is referred to as the “canoe of the ghost” (*ujkungule*). Just as with living people, the dead have all kinds of needs. Thus they also travel by canoe and they need to dress, to work, and to eat (Salomon 1986:79; Harris 2000:32). This is why games are played during the wake, plantain money earned, and plantain coins deposited in the coffin along with real money.¹² This is also why a whole range of personal belongings—such as clothes, fishing hooks, axes, and other types of tools—are deposited inside the coffin. It also explains why food is cooked during the funeral, and why a plate of cooked food is deposited inside the coffin. The needs of the deceased do not stop after the burial, which represents only one phase in a long series of “aftercare” rituals involving shamanism, special masses honoring the deceased, and periodic food offerings.

THE DEAD ARE BODILY PRESENT DURING THE RITUAL

These ethnographic data lead me to conclude that as the dead and the living are kept apart in everyday life, they are systematically brought

together during the wake. The mourners and the game participants are all actively involved in this. To speak of “games,” as I did in my initial description, is somewhat misleading, given that game players are in fact best described using the concept of shape-shifters. They shift from humans into ghosts. Despite the diversity of forms assumed by the players during the games, they all temporarily assume the shape of ghosts, and hence metamorphose into the dead. In other words, the games played during the wake trigger the temporary shift from the realm of the living to that of the dead.¹³

A few general remarks are in order before elaborating on this point. Tobacco and rum play a crucial role in facilitating this transformation from the living into the dead. Save for the close kin left to mourn by the coffin, all those participating in the games consume large amounts of both. In ordinary circumstances, by contrast, Chachi people usually do not drink or smoke.¹⁴ Besides tobacco smoking and rum drinking, there are additional clues—such as their extraordinary singing and the use of esoteric terms such as “*chingwalitu*” or “*kililinda*”—to indicate that game participants do not behave as normal people but as ghosts. Moreover, game participants “take on” the bodies of animals such as cows, chickens, jaguars, horses, fish, macaws, dogs, or white-lipped peccaries, and of plants such as the royal palm or manioc. They also take on the bodies of humans invested with a range of social functions: policemen, fishermen, hunters, or harvesters. The only way to account for these disparate embodiments is to analyze them as many manifestations of beings from the world of the dead, or, in other words, “ghosts.” Game participants become “something-else-than-Chachi,” or “extra-human.”

Understood as such, the wake and its concomitant “games” become a vast shape-shifting operation. Participants in the funerary ritual are not exactly “players.” As far as I know, there is no Cha’palaa term that could be translated literally as “game” or “play.” Actions of participants are labeled with verbs such as *kenu* (“to do”) or *tinu* (“to say”/“to speak”/“to imitate”/“to transform”). Those present at the wake speak of “doing macaw” (*acara kenu*), “speaking macaw,” or “transforming into macaw” (*acara tinu*). Crucially, this is never envisaged as “doing as if” or “speaking like.” They do not see themselves as actors performing for the theater, nor are they simply representing something else. In such a context, to “act other” or to “speak other” is equivalent to becoming that other, as Viveiros de Castro (1992:271) has already suggested. Through the consumption of rum and tobacco, the participant in the wake stops “doing Chachi” and starts “doing Macaw.” As I see it, there is no qualitative difference between these two forms of doing or, as I propose to call them, “shapes,” as it would be utterly

wrong to say that one shape is “real” or “true,” while the other is merely “symbolical” or “imaginary.”

For the Chachi, “doing Macaw” is every bit as real and true as “doing Chachi,” hence the fundamental problem with applying notions such as “game” and “play,” which seems to imply that various forms of doing (or shapes) are different in essence. Persons *are* only by virtue of what they *do*. In my analysis, for the Chachi, playful forms of doing, such as “doing Jaguar,” “doing Cow,” or “doing Manioc” are not different in kind from purportedly serious forms of doing, such as “doing Chachi,” which also means “doing Human.” Far from struggling with representations of the ephemeral or the mystical, Chachi people experience the wake as a moment when the dead are materially present and concretely visible in the shape of ghosts.¹⁵ Wake participants, while absorbed in their fun games, have exactly the same status as the recently deceased.¹⁶ By virtue of their very enjoyment of the wake, participants become what they do, i.e., ghosts or dead.¹⁷

My analysis sheds light on the fact that, essentially, wake activities represent the reverse of what my informants consider to be the “Chachi good life.” Although they do not volunteer a clear exegesis of their funerary rituals, the overall picture of what happens seems quite clear to me. Consider the role of domestic animals. While some Chachi do keep cows or have chickens, this remains a very marginal activity.¹⁸ In any case, I never met a Chachi who prided himself on his domestic livestock or anything related to it. Therefore, the repeated “weighing” and “selling” of such animals at the wake strikes me as strange. Selling or buying domestic animals as commodities is antithetical to the “Chachi good life.” In fact, keeping cows represents to them what the good life means amongst Spanish-speaking settlers. The same goes with manioc harvesting, manioc being a plant more or less alien to the Chachi, whose staple food is plantain. Whipping is equally alien to their culture, where it figures as an aspect of Spanish colonialism. Examples could be multiplied, as all funerary games involve elements that are ultimately non-Chachi. To sum up, participants in funerary games behave in exactly the opposite way of the “Chachi good life.” The only participants displaying a true Chachi demeanor during the wake are the mourners, who are also the closest relatives of the deceased.¹⁹ Readers familiar with the work of Anne-Christine Taylor would not be surprised by these findings, given her effort to show that, throughout the Amazon basin, the dead are systematically transformed into “paradigms of sociological foreignness” (Taylor, 1993:654). This idea is further supported by the work of Philippe Erikson on the Matis, who have been shown to treat their dead in a way that exactly reverses what they consider the right

treatment for the living (2004).²⁰ Olivia Harris's work on the Laymi of the Bolivian Andes also supports this view (2000).²¹ What I suggest here is that participants in funerary rituals may sometimes take up the same "inversed" position as the deceased themselves.

SHAPE-SHIFTING

It is now possible to understand more clearly what "to die" means to the Chachi. Death, in my interpretation, is primarily an event of metamorphosis.²² One casts off one's human shape and assumes the shape of a ghost. The gifts of food, clothes, and money in the coffin indicate that ghosts—from a ghost's point of view—continue to live in a human world, albeit one that cannot be perceived as such by living human beings. To avoid trouble, it is of the utmost importance that the metamorphosis be as complete and thorough as possible.²³ As mentioned previously, problems arise when shapes and conditions are not sufficiently distinguished, such as when a ghost feels "homesick" and longs to return to its former abode.

The central function of the wake and the funeral, I contend, is to ensure the unambiguous passage of the deceased person from the realm of the living to that of the dead. I believe those individuals whom previously I called "the players" temporarily die and become ghosts. Through their ghostly bodily presence, they ensure the smooth passage of the deceased person from this world to the world of the dead, ideally in such a way that the deceased will never regain human shape. "Players," who shape-shift temporarily, recover their human shape as soon as the burial is completed. I prefer to remain cautious on the issue of what or who brings about the shape-shifting I have described. Various authors have been keen to point out that death in native South American cultures is almost never accepted as natural, and that the question that immediately arises is "Who did it?" (Whitehead and Wright 2004). The ethnographic material presented here does not warrant an assumption of death with murder.²⁴ The Chachi deaths I have analyzed in this article were considered by my informants to be naturally caused by old age. On a comparative note, several authors have previously mentioned the practice of holding a wake the night after a death occurs. Explicit joyous behavior and the playing of games in combination with the use of stimulants like tobacco and alcohol is often reported in the Andes and in the adjacent lowlands (Rivet 1927; Karsten 1930; Nordenskiöld 1930; Cooper 1949; Costales Samaniego 1959:118–119; Goldman 1963:220; Carter 1968; Hartmann and Oberem 1968; Whitten 1976:136–138; Fernández and Gutiérrez 1980; Gow 1991:183;

Gose 1994:114–123; Harris 2000:31–32).

The notion of shape-shifting developed here bears obvious similarities to the approach known as “perspectivism” (see Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004). However, the two approaches are not identical. Which metamorphoses are we speaking of when we say that people turn into ghosts during funerary rituals? Are we speaking about changes in perspective or about shifts in shape? Are we dealing with shifts from humans into qualitatively distinct nonhumans, or humans turning into distinct but qualitatively equivalent ghosts? I have attempted here to make a case for the latter. According to Viveiros de Castro, “perspectives” should not be understood as referring to nouns or substantial entities. Neither should they be equated to metaphors or any other kind of representation. Rather, they can be grasped as corresponding to pronouns, or a “cosmological deixis.” To quote his exact words: “Amerindian thought proposes ... a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely *pronominal* or *deictic* ...” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:478, my emphasis). “Shape,” as I conceive it, is similar to Viveiros de Castro’s notion of “perspectivism,” in that it does not refer to substantives. This is why “shape” cannot be equated to metaphor. “Shape” captures the “doing Chachi” or “doing ghost” that is central to the funerary rituals. It denotes physical being plus a specific cultural and moral comportment. For example, it refers to Chachi hunting forest animals or to ghosts weighing and selling chickens. However, “shape” does not correspond to a pronoun or any other deictic category, for this would entail a qualitative difference between distinct shapes. Consider the example of Chachi versus ghost shape. To be sure, people and ghosts are distinct. For instance, people eat plantains while ghosts harvest manioc. However, unlike pronouns, they are not different in kind. Ghosts, like living people, are not invisible, immaterial or “supernatural.” Without denying their fundamental vagueness, ghosts are concretely present during occasions such as wakes, hence should be seen as perfectly equivalent to human beings. To understand metamorphosis fully, we need an approach capable of grasping the embodied materiality—the shapes—of nonhumans.

In previous work (Praet 2006), I showed that the concept of “shape-shifting” is useful in analyzing how Chachi people deal with fear, illness, and catastrophes. Here I have applied shape-shifting to the larger context of death and funerary rituals. In a future work I hope to discuss, test, and develop the idea that native South American rituals, both in Amazonian and in Andean settings, may be fruitfully understood in terms of metamorphosis or shape-shifting.

NOTES

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1. Previous anthropologists such as Barrett (1925) and Altschuler (1964) translate *ujmu* as “soul.” However, this is a term I have chosen to avoid altogether. I believe that “ghost” or “the dead” is a more adequate translation. Sometimes *ujmu* is translated as *fantasma* in local Spanish. Alternative expressions are *ku'me*, usually translated as “soul” or “spirit” and *aama*, derived from the Spanish *alma*.

2. The Chachi, formerly called the Cayapa, are an indigenous group of approximately 9,000 people. Most of them live in the province of Esmeraldas, a part of the wider tropical area known as the Chocó.

3. Destroying houses upon the death of a relative has now become a rare occurrence.

4. Samuel Barrett also noted that “there seems to be a definite desire to destroy all evidences of the life of the deceased and to get rid of any article that would recall him to their minds” (Barrett 1925:334).

5. In theory, nothing prohibits women from participating in the games. In practice, however, games are played mostly by men. When there are not enough male players, women may be invited to play.

6. These games are referred to in local Spanish as *juegos sagrados*. Remarkably, there exists no specific term for these games in Cha'palaa. Funerals are the only context in which these games are played. To otherwise play these games is strictly forbidden, as it would be highly dangerous, causing illness or even death. A child caught imitating a funeral game out of context is severely punished. For a full description of funerary games, see chapter 4 of my doctoral thesis (Praet 2006).

7. The relative who is responsible for buying rum, cigarettes and candles is referred to as *ujcunguuduvei* or *el dueño del entierro*, “the owner of the funeral.”

8. About the plantain coins, Altschuler writes: “... the plantain money is handed over to the ‘owner’ of the deceased who accepts it in exchange for some bottles of rum. The [money] is then placed in the coffin, and it is said that it becomes ‘transformed into real money in heaven’” (1964:91).

9. I have chosen to capitalize the names of the forms in which the players have metamorphosed themselves during funerary games.

10. The Fishermen physically grasp every one of the Fish and make them do a backward somersault, before throwing them on a heap.

11. Peccaries are attracted to the royal palm fruit, and so are macaws, which is why these birds are good indicators of the presence of white-lipped peccaries.

12. In the vernacular, such centers are referred to as *pebulu*, literally “where the

dead are together.” *Pe* comes from the verb *penu*, “to die.” *Bulu* means “together” but also “family,” usually in the sense of “all those living together in the same household.”

13. The Chachi do not literally call the participants in the games “ghosts” or “dead,” but everything they do indicates the participants are considered just that.

14. Far from a daily occurrence, tobacco and rum consumption is confined to special ritual occasions. Wilbert, in a study on the use of tobacco across South America, mentions that it is “always largely confined to magico-religious purposes” and that “[among Amerindians] secular or hedonistic use continues to be the exception rather than the rule.” (1979:14). I would go a step further and suggest that tobacco and rum are explicitly non-Chachi items and that they are “extrahuman.” Smoking tobacco, I believe, is already a manifestation of being “something-else-then-human.” See also Reichel-Dolmatoff on the link between the use of tobacco and shape-shifting in Colombia (1975:48).

15. Hence my reluctance to follow previous ethnographers such as Barrett (1925) in translating *ujmu* as “soul,” this term being too readily associated with the immaterial and the invisible.

16. As shape-shifters, their bodies are no longer human. In that sense, I endorse Viveiros de Castro’s contention that the dead are defined by their disjunction from a *human* body (1998:482).

17. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the consumption of tobacco or other hallucinogens is often conceived of as a kind of death (Chaumeil 1983:64–65; Wilbert 1987:158; Hill 1992:190; Langdon 1992:59; Perrin 1992:111; Pollock 1992:29; Wright 1998:189, Wright 2004:99).

18. In fact, some elders consider the consumption of cow or chicken meat shameful, for it implies that one cannot provide “real” (i.e., hunted) meat, hence that one is a poor hunter.

19. As I understand it, all those refraining from smoking, drinking, and playing remain among the living. Why some people remain in the realm of the living, while others shift into the realm of the dead (and ghosts) is an interesting question. Those who stay on the side of the living are those who were the most intimately connected to the deceased. Physical proximity and intimacy take precedence over blood-relatedness in determining who the closest relatives are. In the wake I describe here, one of the brothers of the deceased person, who lived far away, participated in the games, while a close neighbor, who had no obvious blood connection to the deceased, stayed near the coffin wailing throughout the wake.

20. “The view of the [‘ancestral spirits’] is presented as the inverse, the negative of all that is familiar to humans” (Erikson 2004:125, my translation).

21. For the Laymis, the dead are “devils” strongly associated with the wild (Harris 2000:48).

22. A similar idea has been proposed by Gow, who shows that the Piro notion of “tiredness with living,” that is, the desire to die when one is sick and old, is conceived of as metamorphosis. As he understands it, this “tiredness” is not a search for nothingness or nonbeing, but a desire for another ontological condition. He suggests that dying, in Piro thought, is not the negation of life, but a further

mode of ontogenesis (2001:63). To some extent the idea is also prefigured in Rival's remark that "Death [for the Huaorani] is not so much the end of life but the continuation of something very similar to it, albeit in a different place ... What preoccupies people is not so much afterlife or the end of life as the fact of leaving and separating from those whom one lives with" (1996:93, my translation).

23. See Taylor: "mortuary rituals in lowland cultures ... largely centre on the process of forcing individual beings (the recently deceased) identical to oneself (that is, to the living), to become ontologically distinct. The deceased must disappear as persons ..." (1993:655). Harris points to something similar when she states that at Laymi death vigils "the major concern is to get rid of the ghost and much of the ritual is performed with this aim" (2000:35).

24. In the three funerary events I personally witnessed, I did not hear of any witchcraft or sorcery accusations. Yet, suspicions about sorcery assaults do form a frequent topic of conversation.

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