

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Special Issue in honor of Joanna Overing: In the World and About the World: Amerindian Modes of Knowledge*

Article 11

May 2006

The Politics of Shamanism and the Limits of Fear

Robert Storrie

The British Museum, rstorrie@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Storrie, Robert (2006). "The Politics of Shamanism and the Limits of Fear," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol4/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

The Politics of Shamanism and the Limits of Fear

ROBERT STORRIE

The British Museum

rstorrie@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

The Hoti¹ are a group of about 700 seminomadic people occupying a mountainous territory in the Serranía de Maigualida of central Venezuelan Guiana. They live by hunting and gathering, and slash-and-burn farming. Their land is mostly tropical forest with occasional patches of savannah. The land rises to dramatic ridges and mountains, and is cut with small ravines, fast flowing streams, and rivers. They have a territory of between ten and twenty thousand square kilometers, which their neighbors—the Piaroa, Panare, Hiwi, Yabarana, and Ye'kuana—will visit for trade, sometimes to hunt and fish, or occasionally to pan for gold. At the time of my fieldwork,² more than half of all Hoti people lived at one of two mission villages: a New Tribes Mission (NTM) settlement at the southern limit of their territory on the Caño Iguana River,³ and another at Kayamá at the northern edge of their land, which is run by Roman Catholic nuns.

The Hoti are perhaps the most egalitarian people described in Amazonian ethnography. All Hoti people I asked agreed that there were no fundamental or essential differences in the capacities and understandings of men, women, or children. Anger and violence are excluded from the social domain. One almost never hears raised voices in a Hoti community—children are never punished beyond the mildest rebuke, and certainly are never hit. Human beings, the Hoti say, are always generous and never violent. Human beings cannot kill, or even harm, other human beings, although who is and who is not human is not necessarily immediately obvious. Their assertions of equality rest upon cosmological understandings of the nature of persons, and of humanity. These hold that the eternal aspect of all beings—the *ho* (plural *hodi*)—all have the same appearance, capacities, and origin, all are coeval, and importantly, all inhabit the same moral universe.⁴

In their daily lives Hoti people demonstrate a respect for others and for other points of view. They live in peaceful communities that reject all

forms of domination, coercion, or the authority of one person over another. Yet Hoti moral understandings are framed not in terms of the *absence* of hierarchy, but rather in terms of *resistance* to hierarchy. They understand that maintaining egalitarian social relations in tranquil and harmonious communities is the product of social work. They clearly recognize the human capacities for greed and violence, as well as the desire for power over others. They express this recognition in terms of the transformational nature of the universe, e.g., the possibility that a peaceful, generous human being may become something other than human.

Hoti people frequently assert the equivalence of all beings, and actively seek to undermine authority and hierarchy. Almost all the Hoti people I asked refused to make any kind of normative statements about social life, or moral understandings. They would not say things that could be interpreted as being judgmental of others. They mock anyone who appears to be boastful or authoritarian. They avoid anyone who appears angry or loud, or who shows any inclination towards violence. For the Hoti, one of the defining characteristics of “others,” the nonhuman and the potentially nonhuman, is the expression of a range of emotions all subsumed under the word *yowali*—anger, fierceness, greed and selfishness, bravery, sadness, or violence. One is not *yowali* if one is generous, quiet, reserved, and fearful (*idiyu*).⁵

Despite their assertions of equivalence, their active egalitarianism, and their exclusion of all physical violence from moral, social, and interpersonal relations, there is one area of experience and knowledge in which inequality, power, violence, and fear are all potentially relevant. This area concerns their involvement with the diverse and powerful other-than-human beings of the always present, underlying, immanent, and causal shamanic environment. Shamanism, whether viewed as applied to positive or negative ends, is a very real presence in the world. It does not exist as part of a special domain of experience, nor is it regarded as belonging to a separate sphere of practice. Everyone has a shamanic aspect, their *ho*, and everyone has direct access to the shamanic environment through their dreams, the raw material of shamanism. Before going to sleep at night, almost all adults will pack a strong tobacco mixture in-between their gum and lower lip in order to make their dreams more vivid. Most Hoti shamanism is conducted through sentient dreams produced in this way. Sentient dreaming is learned from an early age by children who listen to adults every morning in the longhouse as dreams are recounted, discussed, and compared. Children are taught to pay attention to their dreams. When they wake up from a vivid dream or a nightmare they are told that what they have seen is very important and that it is real (cf. Santos-Granero 2003).

There is neither a clearly acknowledged role of “shaman,” nor are there ostentatious displays of “shamanism.” There are people who are recognized by others as being especially skilled at interacting with the Outside Beings (*čo ma hađi*). These people are thought to have close relationships with the other-than-human beings—particularly the guardian Forest Elders (*čo aimo*). It is very seldom that anyone will claim or admit to a special ability as a shaman, though there is considerable political skill involved in cultivating such a reputation without ever admitting to it directly. As with many Amazonian peoples, the Hoti are actively egalitarian and for them all power is ambiguous. All claims to authority can arouse suspicion. An admission (or claim) of shamanic ability by anyone can leave that person open to accusations of sorcery.

However, certain people, usually men though sometimes also women or even children, can become fear inducing. Through their skillful engagement with the beings of the mysterious, powerful, and transformational universe—the sources of fertility and disease—they acquire powers of healing and death. They use their power to defend their community, and some may also seek to use their fearful reputations to manipulate or intimidate other Hoti communities. They can even wield their power, creating a politics of fear, in ways that may affect their own coresidents.

How do Hoti people reconcile themselves to the apparent tension between their antihierarchical ethos and the unequal ability to wield shamanic power? The answer lies, I believe, in an understanding of the value placed upon “fearfulness” as an intrinsic and positive human characteristic. In this essay I explore the moral limits of the use of fear, as well as the sanctions that mark and police those limits. This exploration of the aesthetics of fear is examined in the context of Hoti cosmology and understandings of generosity and its abuse. Any discussion of shamanism must necessarily touch upon its ineffable, polyvalent, shifting, and transformational natures. I have attempted to do this through the interweaving of a number of juxtaposed themes that need not, indeed probably cannot, be reconciled. Among the Hoti, those who claim to wield shamanic powers engage in a dangerous and sometimes deadly political game.

TRANSFORMATIONAL UNIVERSE

Shamanism is essential for Hoti people because of the nature and uncertainties of the universe they inhabit. In common with many Amerindian peoples, the Hoti describe a multilayered, transformational

universe in which beings and objects cannot necessarily be known or understood from their appearance.⁶ Rather, the true nature of a person, being, or object can come to be known as a result of their actions or effects, though it is possible that these may never actually be known. I have explored this aspect of Hoti classificatory thought elsewhere (Storrie 1999, 2003), but here it is important to emphasize that Hoti people accept the possibility of different interpretations of the same event or encounter. The same being or object may be experienced differently by different people and thus classified differently. It is for these reasons that an understanding of the shamanic environment becomes so crucial. As Rivière describes for the Trio, "...whether or not a particular creature is the actual creature they see or a spirit wearing that creature's clothes will depend upon the outcome of the encounter, unless one is a shaman and thus able to see through the disguise to the internal reality" (Rivière 1994:257).

Likewise for the Piaroa, uncertainty about identity is a daily ontological puzzle. For them:

... such "problems" of identity ... were certainly not those of "metaphor," for here the Piaroa were obviously worrying about factual identity: "Is that wild pig a human or a vegetable?"—"Is that jaguar an animal, a human sorcerer or a god from "before time?"—"Is that butterfly or bat a sorcerer from a stranger community?" If they got it wrong, it was their understanding that the literal consequences could be grim—the individual could become subject to a predator attack. It was the *Ruwang* [the shaman] who was able to solve such mysteries of identity: he was the one who transformed pig meat, which was really human flesh, into safe vegetable food—he was the one who could see the sorcerer in bat's clothing, and do battle with him (Overing 1990:610).

The cosmos is populated by a large variety of persons and beings. In Hoti thought, they are not divided into categories that correspond to our ideas of "natural" and "supernatural" (or "earthly" and "spiritual"). Rather, the qualities suggested by these categories are embodied to varying degrees in all of these beings. All beings and persons, and some objects, have an eternal soul-like aspect (*ho*) that exists in the shamanic environment, usually in humanlike form, as well as a body that is the distinctive form of their species or kind. In the world of waking experience, the Hoti will point to their chests or stomachs to indicate the *ho*, which is sometimes also called the "animate thing inside the heart" (*kwo hu kwa mā hā*), or "animate thing inside the stomach" (*išo kwa mā hā*).

At one level of explanation, there appears to be an inside and an outside to persons. Inside is the *ho*, the eternal "soul," identical in appearance to all other "souls." All are equivalent and all are coeval to each other. On the

outside is the body, which clothes the soul and gives each being its distinctive characteristics and capacities. Sometimes these anthropomorphic beings (the *ho*, plural *hodi*), which are the natures of their species, can inhabit other bodies, revealing themselves and their true natures through their characteristic behaviors, or rather through the uncharacteristic behavior of the physical form they inhabit.

Importantly, there is no word in Hoti for “body,” nor any concept corresponding to our notion of corporeality (cf. Overing 1997:2). The Hoti do speak of the “skin” (*hedodo*), and will describe this as a container, or covering, for the *ho* within (see Belaunde *intra*, Lagrou *intra*, Rosengren *intra*, and Santos-Granero *intra*, for similar ideas among other native Amazonian peoples). They also call the *ho* “the thing that goes” (*wqi deka ha*), referring both to the *ho*’s departure after death, and the idea that while the “body” sleeps the person experiences the shamanic world.

The nature of a person or being can be altered through the effects of powerful substances acting upon the body, for instance from the eating of meat (see Londoño-Sulkin *intra*, for a comparative example). Bodies and natures, as well as behaviors and souls, are permeable to each other and are either fixed or variable depending upon context. Both the inside and the outside of these entities can vary and can be the site of difference. In the case of a person, for example, who behaves in an inappropriate way, it is believed that they are not “possessed” by another *ho*, but rather that their nature has been altered through bodily contact with some transforming substance.

According to Viveiros de Castro, Amerindians postulate a metaphysical continuity and a physical discontinuity between the beings of the cosmos (1998b:56), which is to say that there is a universal “soul” and variable bodies. However, for the Hoti, the possibility that transformations of the body can change the inner being appears to challenge the notion of a universal soul. The Hoti do describe the possibility that the appearance of a being does not provide certain evidence of its “nature.” But, bodies are more than just the equivalent of “clothes” that embody the capacities and practices of a particular species, and the *hodi* (“souls”) are not, in fact, clearly dissociated from their bodies (see Werlang *intra*). What is inside and what is outside also depends upon context, or point of view. The *ho* is, for the Hoti, inside the skin, but it is a *čo ma ha* (literally “an outside being”), an aspect of the person which exists “outside” (*čo*), in the shamanic world.⁷ What the Hoti are describing, in terms of their lived encounters with other people, are (in Ingold’s terms) “organism-persons” (cf. Ingold 1996:128), who exist, as different aspects with different capabilities, simultaneously in different worlds. For example, a being that exists as a pig in the waking world is

simultaneously an anthropomorphic *ho* in the shamanic environment. (It is not sometimes one thing and at other times a different sort of thing.) Sven-Erik Isacsson describes how Emberá shamans transform themselves through song from “individual” to “cosmos.” The shamanic journeys they undertake are within their bodies (now no longer personal, but cosmic). Isacsson’s understandings are extremely useful in helping us to reflect upon the potential of Amazonian cosmological knowledge of individuals and bodies, and of bodies as cosmos (see Isacsson 1993:70).

Shamans have the capacity to see simultaneously all the possible transformations of a being. They may also have the knowledge to transform themselves, possibly even into dangerous others, such as a predatory jaguar. It is within this universe that the knowledge and acute perceptions of shamans (“those who know well” *ti anku*, or the Light Ones, *kaho hadi*) become matters of life and death. Most Hoti longhouses have at least one such person living in them. This person can be for other people both fearful and awesome, and can provide reassuring protection, but also the possibility of uncontrolled power. A shaman could become lost in a transformation or, having tasted blood as a jaguar, be unable to return to human form. Shamans might even unwittingly attack their own people.

THE LIGHT ONES

The Hoti refer to people they believe to be particularly adept at shamanism as Light Ones (*kaho hadi*). Lightness is, essentially, a shamanic quality. Birds are archetypal *kaho hadi*, they are substantial, that is physically solid, but they are not earthbound. They are able to travel between the domains of the cosmos, and in this regard they are like human *kaho hadi*, who are sometimes described as flying in the same way as birds, or as transforming themselves into birds. The Hoti express a particular fascination with birds and they will point them out in flight, with arm outstretched, saying “*tě, tě, tě*” —“there, there, there.”

“Heaviness” is typically a characteristic of earthbound living things—bodies are “heavy” and some of the other-than-human beings are also said to be heavy. The Masters of animals, the *aimo*, are heavy because of the physicality of the animals they represent. The spirits of Wind and Water are also heavy, say the Hoti, because of the awesome physical power of these elements. Equally, “lightness” is not exclusively a characteristic of incorporeal beings. Thus, jaguars are also “light,” because they leave no tracks, except intentionally, and because they are either the pets of the

Forest Elders, the *čoaimo*, or actually are the Elders themselves in jaguar form, or a transformed human shaman. Jaguars are special—they are always associated with the shamanic environment.

Some people are born light, and display capacities for shamanism from childhood. However, it is the case for everyone that as they grow older the boundary between waking and dreaming becomes less clear, and they become “lighter.” It is from their intermediate state between waking and sleeping, between life and death, that the “lightness” of older people originates. They become increasingly permeable to the “Outside” shamanic environment. But remember that the “Outside” can be located inside the skin, and that the bodies of the Light Ones are light by virtue of their porosity and their permeability. They allow the timeless universe within to leak into this world.

A Light One, then, is believed to have such heightened sensibilities that they can perceive the world of causality that underlies the waking world. They can see what a person or a thing “really” is, and they can develop close relationships with powerful other-than-human persons, who can be persuaded to help or intervene in the lives of the Hoti, bringing protection and success in hunting, or disease and death. They may even become powerful enough themselves to transform into predators such as jaguars. They can range across the world in time and space, while their bodily self remains in their hammock, beside their own hearth. They can cause the *hodi* of other people, particularly the young, to stray, bringing illness or even death. Human sorcery can strip away protection, leaving the victim’s *ho* exposed and vulnerable. Some particularly capable and malevolent people are believed to have the capacity to take a person’s *ho* directly, but usually their powers come from the ability to persuade their supernatural allies to steal the *ho* of their victims.

According to the Hoti, illness and death do not “just happen.” Rather, it is always the consequence of directed agency. The *awéladi*—shadows, ghosts, or aspects of evil—always present in the darkest places and chill damp of the forest, are the direct agents of human death. They might kill by accident with their fatal cold touch, because their unbearable loneliness drives them to seek out the living. They also might act as the agents of human anger or malice, by capturing the *ho* at the intended or unintended behest of a Light One—someone who “knows well” the shamanic world of causes and intervenes either to protect his people or to advance his own selfish ends and desires. The *awéladi* only have the opportunity to kill if a person is deprived of the protection of their guardian Forest Elders. These guardians can be persuaded or tricked into abandoning their charges by human Light Ones. All Outside Beings may react to those human

emotions, which the Hoti describe as *yowali*. Feeling strong emotions can endanger the health and well-being of those around you. Discord, or even concealed anger or resentment within a settlement, is thought to carry risks for everyone. Individuals and families will take themselves away rather than risk arguments that may lead to these emotions. For the Hoti, the dangers involved in feeling negative emotion are not only related to the possible physical dangers but also to the perceived supernatural consequences of deliberately or accidentally directed anger. Hoti people do not make a categorical distinction between physical violence and shamanic violence, but whereas ordinary people may do harm accidentally through their uncontrolled chaotic emotions, the Light Ones can channel harm through directed violence.

SORCERY, GENEROSITY, AND HUMANITY

I turn now to a number of examples of people who were said to be, or themselves claimed to be, Light Ones. A shamanic career as a Light One has a number of possible outcomes. The example to which most would aspire is of the elder and acknowledged head of a long house or community—generous, wise, respected, trusted, and yet still awesome and fearful, but not too fearful. Other possible consequences of engaging in this politics of fear are ridicule, exile, or perhaps even death. Of course, in reality, some of these people are all of these things—respected, feared, ridiculed, avoided, or attacked—by different people at different times.

Generosity is profoundly important in Hoti morality. Greed and meanness are defining behaviors of people who are *yowali*—fierce, angry, “Other.” Generosity is proof of humanity. It demonstrates that a person cannot be *yowali*. Beginning from my first arrival, Hoti people gave me small unsolicited gifts of all kinds, including cooked food, fruit, and honey, as well as bead necklaces and feather ornaments. They were behaving appropriately, showing their own humanity, and waiting to see how I would respond—testing my humanity. Generosity is not only measured in material terms, but also in terms of sociality, time, work, and knowledge. A shaman must give his or her energy and knowledge selflessly to allow their community to prosper under their protection. They are the source of food, through their engagement with the Masters of Animals, and of human fertility through their relations with the Forest Elders, who guard the souls of the yet unborn Hoti. Thus, knowledge, prosperity, fertility, and generosity are all brought together in the ideal shaman. Lack of generosity

was mentioned in all the disputes I heard about that included accusations of sorcery.

ITĚ AND KENOWANO

Itĕ, a man in his fifties, and recently arrived at Kayamá, was something of an outsider. His house and garden, on the other side of a river, were about two kilometers from the other Hoti houses nearer the mission. He lived with his daughters and their husbands and families (see Figure 1). He was aloof and uninterested in visiting and establishing ties with the people of the mission village. In the opinions of others, he should have tried harder as an outsider to get along with the other groups if he hoped to achieve some level of acceptance and overcome the very considerable suspicion that Hoti people have for members of different communities. He boastfully, but also often playfully, claimed to be a Light One.



Figure 1: Itĕ and family

Kenowano, in contrast, was an important man in the mission community. He had five sisters married to older men in the village, and the nuns had appointed him their go-between with the community. When Kenowano's daughter died suddenly after a brief fever, it was remembered that Itĕ had been seen arguing with the girl on the river bank some weeks earlier. The suspicion grew among members of Kenowano's family that

Itë's anger was the cause of the girl's death. Kenowano's family confronted Itë and tried to force him to leave. However, they soon realized that they did not have the support of even their close kinsmen, as Itë was considered more clown than threat by the wider community. The matter was soon quietly dropped. Itë, for his part, following this confrontation, did begin to interact much more with the other households of the village. Itë and his wife even announced their intention of being baptized and began attending the church meetings held by the nuns every Sunday. This was an astute move on Itë's part, because Kenowano was closely associated with the mission (he had even built his house inside the nuns' compound). Itë also contributed almost the entire produce of his gardens to a communal feast, and with this display of generosity/humanity re-established friendly relations with the other families of Kayamá.

ABIYEMA AND ULI DEWA

When I questioned people in different settlements about violence there was general agreement that this was a characteristic of "other people" ("other people" can refer both to other Hoti, and non-Hoti). When pressed, almost everyone agreed that Hoti did occasionally fight or kill, and many people were able to give examples, apparently from their own experience. I accumulated several accounts of fatal violence and believed this presented an intriguing contrast with the very explicit prohibition on the expression, or even experience, of anger among the Hoti. Gradually, as I came to appreciate the subjective nature of Hoti naming, I realized that many of these accounts of violence referred to a single feud between two groups, and probably to a single incident. The different stories were actually a series of different interpretations of the same event, refracted through the slow networks of gossip.

I was eventually able to interview some of those actually involved in the fight. What happened is largely not in dispute. The different interpretations revolve around motives and justification.

The version of events that circulated around the mission village at Kayamá after some of Uli Dewa's group had visited was as follows. Abiyema, a very old man and a feared sorcerer, sent several of his people to kill Uli Dewa, also an old and famous Light One who lived about three-days-walk away (see Figure 2). Abiyema's settlement had suffered several deaths and he became convinced that Uli Dewa was responsible. The raiders—at least two of Abiyema's sons, two women, and others—armed

with lances and machetes, arrived outside Uli Haiye's house at night and called him and his father, Uli Dewa, to come out. Both wisely stayed inside. The attackers entered and in the struggle Uli Dewa and one other in the house were wounded. Uli Haiye succeeded in disarming at least



Figure 2: Abiyema

one attacker and with this lance killed three of them and wounded one or more others. One woman, who had attacked Uli Dewa with a machete, was among the dead.

Another widespread version of the story was that Abiyema's group was visiting Uli Haiye, principally to trade. They asked for, and received, machetes, knives, and pans. But when they demanded blowguns Uli Haiye said there were none. This was an obvious lie, because there are always blowguns in a Hoti house. The guests had been too demanding and had asked for too much. Their insistence that they be given blowguns was, for Uli Haiye, the last straw. Then, according to varying versions of the story, either this refusal immediately provoked the argument that led to the fight, or the guests left, returning later to attack their former hosts. Both of the old men subsequently retreated with most of their families to forest camps distant from each other.

As is typical, this argument conflated accusations of sorcery with a lack of generosity, with both sides anxious to demonstrate that they had been generous. Sorcery and meanness are in many contexts interchangeable in disputes. This dispute, which led to several deaths, was by far the most serious in my experience.

KUČO AND HANI KAMAYA

Kučo's house and gardens sit at a crossroads in the center of Hoti territory (see Figure 3). He lives with his wife and five young sons in a tiny dome-shaped house, tightly closed against the chill nights common at 1000 meters above sea level. He lives where his father did before him on a small plateau just below the highest mountain in the Sierra de Maigualida. Kučo and his visitors call this mountain *huana inéwa*, "blowgun mountain," and on the rafters inside his house there are always bundles of the valuable reeds that are used for blowgun inner tubes. As with many heads of isolated settlements, Kučo has a reputation as a Light One and sorcerer among the people at the Caño Iguana mission village, which lies two days brisk walk to the south. The path is neither clearly marked nor often traveled, but it is well-known as the only route linking the two missions of Caño Iguana and Kayamá. Once or twice every year, someone will make the journey. When they do they will always stop to trade for blowgun reeds at Kučo's house. Another path connects Kučo and his reeds to the rivers to the west, and ultimately to the Yabarana and Piaroa. Kučo's people have always lived in this place, and they have always been the first link in the chain that supplies blowguns far away to the big rivers. Kučo's reputation as a Light One serves to deter many people from undertaking their own expeditions to cut reeds, although there are some people who remain unimpressed, or

who feel that they too have long-standing claims to the territory and are not threatened by Kučo's presence.

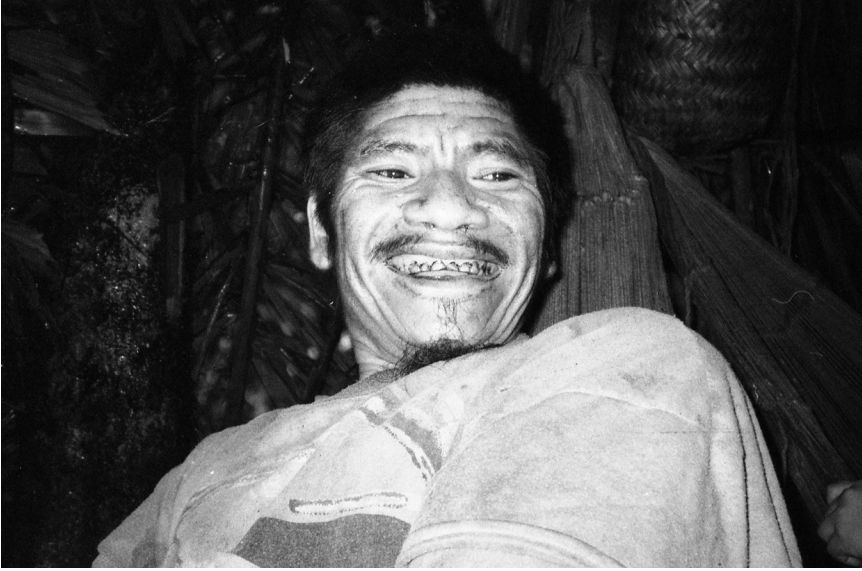


Figure 3: Kučo

While traveling with men from Caño Iguana named Maičo, Tamuha, and Kwaiča I had occasion to visit Kučo. We were on our way to visit the village at Kayamá. My companions stopped for the night and built a small shelter in front of his house. The evening was spent comparing and admiring blowguns. Tamuha was particularly keen to take reeds to trade in Kayamá. He and Kučo pulled the two and three meter-long reeds out one by one, flexed them, looked them up and down, and discussed their relative merits. Then, they placed them all back in the rafters. The next morning the same thing happened, though by mid-morning Tamuha had selected for himself a half dozen of what he considered to be the finest reeds. Kučo did not ask for anything in return, nor was any offer made. (see Figure 4)

A month later, returning along the same path, we stopped once again outside Kučo's house. Tamuha had not managed to exchange all the reeds he had taken, nor had he acquired as much curare from the Panare as he had hoped. At this point, Kučo made his requests and everybody gave him something: a pot of curare and a sharpening file from Tamuha; a lance from Maičo; a knife from Kwaiča; and even a knife from Hani Kule, a man from Kayamá who had accompanied us on the return journey in order to visit his family in Caño Iguana. We settled down for the night. Maičo

announced that we would stay all the next day to trade for more blowguns. However, by the next morning, the visitors had changed their minds and were in a hurry to leave. They explained that Kučo was *yowali* ("fierce," or "angry," et cetera). We broke camp and left as quickly as possible.



Figure 4: Tamuha (left) trading for blow-gun reeds from Kučo (center)

On the same journey with Maičo, Tamuha and Kwaiča, we paused for a night at the only other house apart from Kučo's on the ten-day walk between the two missions. I was tired, hungry, and glad to arrive at Hani Kamaya's settlement. Hani Kamaya, a man in his late forties, was strong and fit with a wispy beard and pale skin stained black in patches with dye. He greeted us with a gourd of honey water that he handed to us without ceremony. He and his family then stayed on, chatting to my companions for an hour or two until dark, when they went back inside their house and sealed the door for the night. We made our camp in a lean-to cooking shelter beside the house and spent a cold night huddled around the fire. Next morning, we broke camp quickly and left shortly after dawn. I did not comment on, or particularly notice, the lack of hospitality at the time. I was accustomed to being received in very different ways in different settlements, sometimes in a friendly and open manner, and at other times sullenly and suspiciously. On the return journey, more than a month later, we arrived at Hani Kamaya's house again at the end of our second day's walk from Kayamá. We stopped and I assumed we would spend the night there again. However, after only a few minutes, Maičo lifted his basket, settled the strap across his forehead, and strode out of the settlement

muttering to me that these were bad and dangerous people, and that they would try to poison us if we stayed. Instead of staying, we pushed on until after dark—an unusual thing to do when traveling in the forest—and camped in an uncomfortable, swampy hollow.

Maičo explained to me that Hani Kamaya had not given us food and that this was an indication of his character. It was reasonable to fear that this lack of generosity showed malicious intent. Hani Kamaya is feared by the people of Kayamá as a sorcerer, and they do not allow him to visit. Nevertheless, Hani Kamaya has a history of contact with some of the groups settled at Caño Iguana, which meant that Maičo was not immediately or necessarily disposed to believe ill of him. Maičo might have been influenced during our stay in Kayamá by the prejudices of our hosts, but it was the clear evidence of meanness that convinced him that Hani Kamaya was dangerous. Moreover, Hani Kamaya had not drunk first from the gourd of honey water before passing it to us—an obligatory courtesy to reassure guests of friendly intent. Given the universal association between generosity and trustworthiness among the Hoti, it is probable that the message received by Maičo was exactly the one Hani Kamaya intended to convey. On our first visit, Hani Kamaya himself proudly told me that the Kayamá people were afraid of him. A day later, two of Hani Kamaya's sons caught up with us, and announced that they would come with us back to Caño Iguana (see Figure 5).

Both Kučo and Hani Kamaya were unable to travel to the mission villages or even to venture far from their home territories. They had established and maintained fierce reputations and were certainly not ever ridiculed or considered funny by other Hoti people. Despite their reputations as powerful shamans, they were unable to attract a large following, and even their adult children had left to join other settlements nearer the missions.

Both Kučo and Hani Kamaya were feared because my companions thought them to be *yowali*. Anyone can become *yowali* (under many circumstances it is not immoral *in itself* to be *yowali*) through grief or illness, or through the actions of others that make you angry, or through solitude. In addition to a lack of generosity being an indication that someone is *yowali*, wanting to be alone is also *yowali*. The willful rejection of sociality and conviviality is equated to meanness. Kučo and Hani Kamaya were both condemned to solitude by their power and their reputation, and also condemned by their solitude, which confirmed their antisocial natures. Both Kučo and Hani Kamaya were beyond negotiation. The reputation of their power reached outside of Hoti territory and yet they were isolated, effectively exiled from all possibilities of exchange and sociality outside of their own longhouses.



Figure 5: Hani Kamaya's sons

TIMOTEO, ICU DODO, AND KWAICA

Timoteo is acknowledged by everyone in the mission village of Caño Iguana as someone who “knows well” (*ti anku*) and as a Light One. Such unanimity in deferring to him as an authority on the behavior of the other-than-human Outside beings is an indication of a very considerable reputation for shamanic ability, one that extends far beyond the Iguana Valley. Timoteo is not old—when I knew him he was in his late thirties. In his manner he is quiet, humble, and smiling, and he seldom speaks in public. The NTM missionaries, recognizing his position and considerable intelligence, had trained him as a nurse, and as such he became responsible for a synthesis of biomedical and shamanic healing. His house is a center for visiting and eating in the village. He and his family work hard to be good hosts.

Also in Caño Iguana, there were two brothers, Icu Dodo and Kwaica aged eighteen and sixteen at the time of this account. As with other Hoti teenagers, they appeared to enjoy the freedom to be both adult and child as they chose. They came to my attention as being different from other teenagers as a result of a very abnormal series of events. Icu Dodo and Kwaica called a meeting in Timoteo’s house, making the unusual claim that they were “going to teach.” This was the first of several meetings that they hosted over a period of about a month in October and November 1996, which almost the entire village attended. The meetings began with the boys giving instruction, mainly directed at children, on appropriate behavior. There was broad agreement from the assembly with what they were saying: “People should not take food from other people’s gardens” and “people must not take things without asking.” Individual children were called to stand in front of those attending the meeting and to account for their past behaviors. Gradually the instruction began to include young adults and then older people. Icu Dodo and Kwaica criticized these people for having affairs,⁸ for being bad husbands and wives, and for threatening to leave the community. The meetings also became a forum for deciding marriages among the young teenagers. I was surprised by the extent to which the Hoti tolerated this judgmental and dictatorial behavior, which in any other context would have been completely unacceptable to the Hoti.

Icu Dodo and Kwaica began to make threats. They said that hunters should always come to them before going in search of animals, or otherwise they might get killed in an accident. Icu Dodo said that he would accompany the hunters (in spirit). He also said that he would tear the *ho* from the stomach of anyone who opposed his teaching. He was

clearly threatening to kill.

I compared notes with one of the NTM missionaries and he agreed that this was unprecedented. In the twenty years that he had lived among the Hoti, he had never seen a meeting of any kind, nor had he witnessed public criticism of any member of the community, much less hear expressed such threats within a community.⁹

Both the boys claimed that they were *kaho hadi*, Light Ones and both had been widely recognized as such from a very young age. Icu Dodo in particular had demonstrated this capacity as a small child. His mother said she had known of his shamanic potential since he was only a few years old because of his demonstrated abilities in prescient dreaming, that is, showing knowledge and experience of other places, times, and events. For example, he was able to successfully predict for hunters the movement and future locations of game animals.

Throughout their meetings Timoteo sat silently, apparently endorsing the boys' behavior. However, after several of these meetings in his house, he let it to be known discretely that Icu Dodo and Kwaica were "teaching their own thoughts." Many members of the community had been under the impression that the boys' moral message had come from the missionaries with Timoteo's backing. His intervention had the effect of bursting the bubble of, and completely undermining, any authority that the boys had established. Though some old women had expressed their skepticism during these meetings, after Timoteo's intervention the women elders harangued and publicly shamed the boys.¹⁰

The boys were humiliated and Kwaica took the opportunity of going on a six-week trek with me to avoid further shame. "I'm afraid to be seen" (*we idiyu*), he said. His use of this term *idiyu* is interesting. One is not *yowali* if one is *idiyu* (that is generous, quiet, reserved, and fearful). It seems that through the intervention of Timoteo and the women elders, these emotions and values fundamental to true human sociality had been instilled again in Kwaica.

Threats of shamanic violence are taken very seriously. In this instance, the community was briefly caught off guard by these teenage shamans, who, through political ineptitude, managed eventually to undermine their own growing authority. Indeed, the Hoti's anti-hierarchical ethos itself made it impossible for the community to discount the boys' claims on the basis of their age, inexperience, or even their demonstrated political ineptitude. They had to treat them with respect as equal persons until their behavior became too threatening to be tolerated. The status of the boys shifted from awe-inducing to terrifying when they threatened to tear out the souls of any who opposed them.

FEAR AND LAUGHTER

Authority is measured in part by the extent to which the accounts of a person's dreams, or the interpretation of their own and others' dreams, are accepted by others as a more or less true vision. This authority, in turn, rests upon both the practical usefulness of the information the dreams provide (for example, in healing or in identifying the location of game), and also upon a finely tuned political sensibility, which balances sociality with "awesomeness."

As previously mentioned, the Hoti are highly egalitarian. Authority is, at best, only transient among the Hoti. It briefly coalesces, manifesting itself in isolated moments of agreement. A person's authority rests on the degree to which others accept their version of the world as an accurate interpretation. But undoubtedly, the personal experience of one's followers is always undermining any authority established, and, among the Hoti, authority can never become embedded in hierarchy.

Hoti cosmological accounts focus upon unflattering stories that mock the powerful, other-than-human beings who created the physical world that the Hoti now inhabit. These stories repeat, in slapstick style, the common Amazonian message that power deranges.¹¹ The gods are driven insane by the powers they wield, and they become clowns who are nightly taunted in the performances of Hoti storytellers. The same fate awaits anyone who seeks power over others, since people who are in the position of leadership are already funny. Giving orders makes other people laugh. And yet, in many communities there is someone about whom one cannot laugh and who should not be mocked, someone who, though they do not give orders, is nevertheless a leader. These Light Ones, people who "know well," command a respect that rests upon fear. This returns us to the central concern of this essay, that is, the contradiction between accumulating and wielding a power based upon the threat of (shamanic) violence; and Hoti understandings that make clear the immorality of making other people afraid, seeking to control others, and behaving ungenerously. A shaman who seeks to control others by inducing fear is, by definition, using his power and knowledge selfishly and ungenerously.¹²

THE SUBLIME AND THE LIMITS OF FEAR

From the discussion above, it is clear that there are limits to the shamanic powers a person can accumulate and a limit to the fear that they

can induce in others. To be fearful is to be human (cf. Howell 1989:45). To be fearful is a valued condition, one that affirms humanity. Yet Hoti people will not accept behavior in others that threatens their lives, and causes this fearfulness and humility to deepen. In such an event, one is morally justified in defending oneself, even with violence. As we have seen in the examples given above, shamans who induce fear risk being subject to humiliating mockery or even attacked with lances and machetes.

In notions of the sublime we find a language with which to approach the awesome and the fearful. For Edmund Burke, the root of the sublime is fear and terror. Such fear is caused, he explained, by obscurity, power, and infinity. Shaman at the height of their power have the ability to persuade those around them that they can perceive the infinite transformations of the shamanic environment, which are obscure to others. In Burke's terms, this ability is truly sublime. This is why houses of successful, generous shamans are vibrant centers of conviviality, where the mythic landscapes of Outside and the absurd antics of the creators are conjured in laughter and fire-lit visions. This sublime is compelling, attractive, and highly social, even while it is also awesome and fear inducing. In Edmund Burke's words:

... if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious—if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome encumbrance, they are capable of producing delight—not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror—which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime. Its highest degree I call astonishment—the subordinate degrees are awe, reverence, and respect, which, the very etymology of the words show from what source they are derived, and how they stand distinguished from positive pleasure" (from *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, IV,7, 1756, cited in Eco 2004:293).

The Hoti shamans can be considered sublime, but should their actions reveal a dangerous intent (either ungenerous or directly threatening), their knowledge no longer induces in their communities a sense of awe and security, but instead appears to threaten. To understand this shift, following Eco, we can invoke Kant's image of the sublime storm, which at a distance inspires excitement and delight: "Thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals ... [and] the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force ... is all the more attractive for its fearfulness." But, as the storm approaches, and one's position is no longer distant and secure, it reaches a point where the immanent threat supplants

the sublime (cited in Eco 2004:295). When the fearfulness becomes too intense, when it is “carried to violence,” when Hoti people believe that they or their community are actually threatened, then they can and do react, answering the threat of shamanic violence with their lances.¹³

CONCLUSION

The Hoti live in a transformational universe in which their everyday experience of the beings around them is one of potential and ambiguity. Hoti people recognize that there are different levels of understanding when faced with this ontological puzzle. Those people considered to be “light” are believed to have the clearest vision of the shamanic environment. The importance of individual experience for the Hoti, in classifying the beings and objects they encounter, means that there is no expectation of a final “truth” or orthodoxy. Shamans display great skill in convincing those around them that their knowledge will produce efficacious results. In so doing they are often centers of sociality, displaying great generosity not only in the material sense of sharing food and access to trade goods, but also in terms of their knowledge. This knowledge is used to heal and protect their community, to find plentiful game, and to ensure human fertility. However, as shown above, not all shamans are politically skillful and some have difficulty maintaining their position.

Because of their great knowledge Light Ones are the objects of awe and respect. The power they command is clearly problematic for such a highly egalitarian society. Their communities obviously value and draw reassurance from their presence, but other groups may find them intimidating and even terrifying. The difficulty for shamans is in maintaining a reputation as powerful, while reassuring other people of their continued generosity and goodwill. Light Ones are very seldom feared by their closest kin and coresidents. But, as illustrated in the case of Kučo and Hani Kamaya, their reputations had driven them into such isolation that their own families drifted away from them in search of more social and convivial communities. The exhilaration of the sublime is one explanation for the tolerance of Hoti people towards the fear that may be induced by powerful shamans. Yet, this tolerance has limits.

For the Hoti, everyone, even a child, potentially may have shamanic abilities (as is demonstrated by the example of the teenage shamans who had been Light Ones since childhood). Everyone is therefore in a position to make judgments about the claims of shamans (see Londoño-Sulkin *intra*). However, recognition as a Light One is not something that most people aspire to, at least not openly. For shamans to remain within

a community they must not openly claim this ability, but only allow it to be imputed to them, which often requires acute political skills. Hoti people struggle against hierarchy. They do not tolerate the overt exercise of authority. Shamanic power is thus ambiguous. It is essential to survival and continued fertility, but at the same time wielding it risks undermining highly valued convivial tranquility. Those shamans who openly proclaim their shamanic prowess, and therefore their capacity for fatal violence, are physically prevented from coming near other Hoti settlements. If they do, they are likely to be reclassified and killed as deadly nonhuman predators.

Hoti people maintain the importance of personal experience in interpreting and classifying their world, and they do not defer to any final authority or view. They participate in the collective and social negotiation of the narratives that describe both the nature of the world they live in and the threats they face, including fear-inducing Others in all their forms. Through humor, mockery, and violence if necessary, the Hoti are able to limit—for those who would be shamans—the capacity to accumulate authority or to wield power.

NOTES

1. The name “Hoti” has been the most widely used designation for this group in Venezuela since the 1970s, and is derived from the word *hodi* (*ho* + animate plural suffix, *di*). It is not, strictly speaking, an auto-denomination, since the word *ho* means “person,” or sentient being, and does not necessarily distinguish the Hoti from other humans, or humans from other persons (animals and supernatural beings). The Hoti do not have an objective name for themselves as a group, but instead refer to “I,” “we,” “us,” or “my people.”

2. The fieldwork upon which this paper is based was undertaken between April 1994 and March 1997.

3. In October 2005, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela ordered the expulsion of all New Tribes Mission personnel from the country. The four NTM families resident at Caño Iguana complied with the order before the deadline of February 12, 2006.

4. See Storrie (2003) for a discussion of the relationship between classification and cosmological understandings.

5. Signe Howell describes something very similar for the Chewong of Malaysia, who say that “to be angry is not to be human, but to be fearful is” (1989:45).

6. See also, for example, Overing (1981, 1990); Black (1977); Rivière (1994); Viveiros de Castro (1992, 1996, 1998a, 1998b); and Londoño Sulkin (2000, 2005).

7. The word *cho* directly translates the word “outside,” as in “outside the house.” It can also mean “forest” or “sky,” and it refers to the domain of dreams

and other-than-human beings. In this sense, it can also mean “outside of time, or “outside of form.”

8. The Hoti do not maintain a distinction between “marriage” and “affairs”—most Hoti people will have children with at least three people in their lifetimes and can have a number of acknowledged relationships simultaneously. The boys seem to have picked up this notion from the missionaries.

9. David Rodman (1996), personal communication.

10. This is also extraordinary. Normally even the naughtiest child is not subjected to punishment this severe.

11. See Joanna Overing *intra*, for a detailed exploration of the ludic genres of the grotesque employed by the Piaroa, near neighbors of the Hoti.

12. Interestingly, all those who could be viewed as selfish or ungenerous shamans were men. I knew three women who were generally acknowledged as respected shamans. All three were considered exemplary in their generosity.

13. For a discussion on the nature of the sublime and its place in understanding a contemporary politics of fear see White (2005:187–202).

REFERENCES CITED

- Black, Mary B.
1977 “Ojibwa Taxonomy and Percept Ambiguity.” *Ethos* 5(1):90–118.
- Eco, Umberto
2004 *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Howell, Signe
1989 “To Be Angry Is Not To Be Human, But To Be Fearful Is: Chewong Concepts of Human Nature.” In *Societies at Peace: Anthropological Perspectives*. Signe Howell and Roy Willis, editors, pp. 79–99. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim
1996 “Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment.” In *Redefining Nature: Ecology, Culture and Domestication*. Roy Ellen and Katsuyoshi Fukui, editors, pp. 117–55. London: Berg.
- Isacsson, Sven-Erik
1993 *Transformations of Eternity: On Man and Cosmos in Embará Thought*. Ph. D. dissertation, University of Göteborg.
- Londono Sulkin, Carlos D.
2005 “Inhuman Beings: Morality and Perspectivism among Muinane People (Colombian Amazon).” *Ethnos* 70(1):7–30.
2000 “Though it Comes from Evil, I Embrace it as Good: Social Sensibilities and the Transformation of Malignant Agency among the Muinane.” In *The Anthropology of Love and Anger the Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*. Joanna Overing and Alan Passes, editors, pp. 170–186. New York: Routledge.

246 Robert Storrie

Overing, Joanna

- 1981 "Review Article: Amazonian Anthropology." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 13:151–64.
- 1990 "The Shaman as a Maker of Worlds: Nelson Goodman in the Amazon." *Man* 25(4):602–19.
- 1989 "Styles of Manhood: An Amazonian Contrast in Tranquility and Violence." In *Societies at Peace: Anthropological Perspectives*. Signe Howell and Roy Willis, editors, pp. 79–99. London: Routledge.
- 1997 "The 'Conscious I', the Life of Desires, and the Attachment to Custom: A Piaroa Theory of Practice." Paper presented at the 49th International Congress of Americanists.

Rivière, Peter G.

- 1994 "WYSINWYG in Amazonia." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 3:255–62.

Santos-Granero, Fernando

- 2003 "Pedro Casanto's Nightmares: Lucid Dreaming in Amazonia and the New Age Movement." *Tipiti* 1(2):179–210

Storrie, Robert

- 1999 *Being Human: Personhood, Cosmology and Subsistence for the Hoti of Venezuelan Guiana*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Manchester.
- 2003 "Equivalence, Personhood and Relationality: Processes of Relatedness among the Hoti of Venezuelan Guiana." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9(3):407–28.

Taussig, Michael T.

- 1991 *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo

- 1998a "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4:469–88.
- 1998b "Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere." General lectures (February 17–March 10). Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge.
- 1992 *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1996 "Images of Nature and Society in Amazonian Ethnology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25:179–200.

White, Curtis

- 2005 *The Middle Mind*. London: Penguin.