Christian Modernisation in Amazonia
Emerging Materialism in Shuar Evangelicals’ Healing Practices

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Abstract
The project of ontological anthropology expounded by Philippe Descola has unexplored merits for a critical and secular anthropology of Christian conversion in indigenous societies. Drawing on Shuar descriptions of their healing practice in a context of medical pluralism in southeast Ecuador, this article argues that for animist peoples, Protestant Evangelicalism constitutes a step toward philosophical materialism or ‘naturalism’. While Shuar healing reserves a central place for hallucinogenic plant-induced visions for personal empowerment and shamanic healing, Shuar Evangelicals express a preference for engaging only the material qualities of medicinal plants. This is not, however, the consequence of adopting a disenchanted material cosmology but of a submissive mode of relating to the immaterial aspects of reality normally engaged in ancestral Shuar ontology. The article thereby extends the ontological turn’s emphasis on what is known to a consideration of modes of relation to ontological content.

Keywords: Amazonia, animism, Christianity, conversion, Evangelicalism, naturalism, Ontological turn, perspectivism

The project of ontological anthropology expounded by Philippe Descola has unexplored merits for a critical and secular anthropology of Christian conversion in indigenous societies. Polemically branded as ‘museum’ anthropology for the supposed objectification of its ethnological analysis (Ingold 2016), the classificatory distance Descola establishes vis-à-vis indigenous ontologies and ontological change is an asset in the context of the anthropology of conversion. Extending on the model of Descola and others (Descola 2013: 386–388; Martínez Mauri and Halbmayer 2020), this article proposes that ethnographic attention to people’s changing modes of relation to ontological content helps to make sense of local changes in the meaning and conceivability of practices following conversion and
does so more effectively than accepting Christians’ discourse at face value or down-
playing the historical changes brought by Christianity (Robbins 2011: 414–415).

This argument is advanced via an ethnography of Shuar converts to Protestant
Evangelicalism. An indigenous group from the southern Ecuadorian Amazon, most
Shuar people converted to Catholicism in the latter half of the twentieth century,
but Evangelicalism has gained a critical, sectarian appeal such that the religion now
constitutes a sizeable minority presence. The ethnography draws on four months
living in an Evangelical household in a small, isolated Shuar town, as well as conver-
sations with Shuar Evangelicals residing elsewhere over the subsequent five months
in 2013–2014. This research project centred on people’s illness experiences and
preferences between biomedical, shamanic and herbal forms of healing, which is
why conversion is approached through discussion of healing practices in this article.

To illustrate my interpretation of Shuar Evangelicalism, I principally draw on the
accounts of three people: Martina, whose household I shared for the four months; Elsa,
her widowed aunt; and Antonio, her thirty-year-old cousin.1 Their lives
centred on subsistence horticulture and, for Antonio and Martina, arduous small-
scale cash-cropping. Martina also owned pasture and half a dozen cattle. Antonio
had a hut near his parcel of land an hour’s walk into the forest and also operated a
dry-goods store out of his house in town, where his wife and children lived during
school terms. Elsa lived alone in a hut next to her garden near Antonio’s land.

I came to know Antonio and Elsa through their visits to Martina’s house, making
purchases at Antonio’s store, attending occasional Bible readings with them and
other members of their extended family, and helping Antonio with machete work
(clearing, pruning, planting) in the forest. All three were humble and chastened in
disposition, including Antonio, though Shuar men are typically proud and verbose.
This was not just an effect of their economic conditions. Martina was raising six
children alone; her husband was absent and said to drink too much. Elsa had lost
six of her grandchildren to illness, and likewise Antonio had recently lost his young
daughter. Their conversion to Evangelicalism followed these misfortunes (see also

An atmosphere of suffering and penitence prevailed at the rickety church the
family had constructed near Antonio’s and Elsa’s homes on a hill outside town. With
its few wooden benches, tin roof, rough timber boards for walls and swept earthen
floor, the church materialised the ascetic side of the Christian aesthetic. The Evan-
gelicals prayed there multiple times per week, typically starting around sunset and
going for hours into the night. The contrast is stark between the wailing, penance
and feigned flagellation of these worships and the opulent views of mountainous
rainforest to be taken in from around the church.

Although my understanding of Evangelicalism developed over time, in this
article I quote from extended interviews recorded in this specific setting. In August
2013, the family was visited for a day by one of Martina’s many half-brothers (her
father had over thirty children). He had studied at one of the Evangelical missions
in Morona-Santiago province and now travelled to deliver sermons. Following a
morning fast and a five-hour church service, I recorded interviews with Martina,
Elsa, Antonio and the pastor on the subject of religion, sickness and healing, as we finally relaxed and broke the fast with roast plantain. Between the fasting, the pastor’s visit and the physical relief, it was a heady atmosphere that facilitated conversation and helped in making explicit the religious principles that were guiding these people’s lives during the period of time I shared with them.

Identities, even identities based on religious conviction, are not set in stone. Territorialised individuals who form part of a community of believers and live and work in a subsistence relation to land may travel outside indigenous territory for work, marriage, education or other reasons, and thereby begin to experience a different positionality with respect to capital, racial hierarchies and religion. This article’s method and sources serve to foreground the Evangelical impulse in itself, leaving readers to consider how individuals will inevitably instantiate that impulse in different ways and to different degrees over the course of their lives.

This article began with a simple observation: Shuar Evangelicals engage only the material properties of medicinal plants, while rejecting the practices of hallucinogenic plant-inspired shamanic healing and vision-seeking common among non-Evangelical Shuar. These practices align with Descola’s model of animism; non-Evangelical Shuar continue to interact with medicinal plants as active and animate living-beings, who may be called upon by ingesting these plants and who actively effect cures upon a sick or injured person. Shuar Evangelicals, on the other hand, engage with medicinal plants as instruments with predictable properties derived from ‘nature’ and commonly say that such plants were put here by God for them to make use of. After a brief literature review, this ethnographic finding is introduced in the following section alongside three facets of Protestant Evangelicalism’s role that create distance from animist assumptions.

The article’s third section complicates this apparent naturalism or materialism in Shuar Evangelicals’ healing practice, presenting Shuar Evangelical accounts of their own healing during visions triggered while praying and beseeching God. This suggests that even after converting, visions remain ontologically real and important to Shuar Evangelicals. The tension between these two sections speaks to a broader difficulty in understanding Christianity: how a religion whose concerns are so apparently mystical and immaterial can have functioned historically as a forerunner to modernisation and the philosophical materialism characteristic of its worldview.

An obstacle to understanding here, I argue, lies in the tendency to dichotomise between a materialist worldview and a non-materialist one and to label the latter as ‘animism’. A greater attention to people’s modes of relating to ontological content in non-materialist contexts better elucidates cultural changes, such as that brought by Protestant Evangelicalism, than fixating on the analytical significance of the mere fact of the existence and agency of ‘non-humans’.

How might this conceptual approach focused on modes of relation to ontological content shed light on the long-term significance of introducing the Protestant ‘God’ to animist peoples like Amazonian Shuar? The article’s fourth and final section reconciles the prior two sections by arguing that the apparent ‘naturalism’ of Shuar Evangelicals’ use of medicinal plants is not the product of a newfound
philosophical materialism but of a submissive mode of relation to God and the subsidiary entities of the Evangelical cosmology. Abandoning the relatively balanced interactions with non-human 'spirits' characteristic of Amazonian animism among non-Evangelicals, Shuar Evangelicals abnegate spiritual agency in their submission before God, and in doing so, although they do not immediately become naturalists upon conversion, take a step toward a deanimated, materialist cosmos.

**Conversion, Continuity and Ontological Change**

Study of Christian conversion in indigenous societies has been a productive field of anthropological research. This is not just because of the worldwide proliferation of charismatic forms of Christianity in recent decades (Coleman and Hackett 2015). As Webb Keane puts it, conversion is especially revealing because it involves 'the encounter between people who start from sharply contrasting assumptions' (2007: 8). In indigenous territories in lowland South America, this has included the startling finding that because converts do not see their cosmology as a religion parallel to that offered by the missionaries, they tend not to understand conversion as replacing indigenous cosmology (Gow 2006; Viveiros de Castro 2011).

Anthropology in the region has thus typically framed indigenous people’s conversion to Christianity in terms of transformations internal to the logic of indigenous cultures rather than as a rejection of inherited culture. Indigenous people are said to have seen Christian missionaries and priests as simply a new kind of shaman possessing new shamanistic techniques (Gow 2009; Hugh-Jones 1994; Laugrand and Oosten 2009; Santos-Granero 2004; Taylor 1981), while indigenous enthusiasm for Christian practices like singing (McNally 2000; Yvinec 2019) and preaching (Albó 1988: 363–400; Romio 2018) is considered to have roots in pre-Christian Indigenous life. Conversion has also been understood as an occasion to renew extant ideals of sociality by living together in communities centred on a church or mission (Capiberibe 2018; Gow 2001; High 2016), in the process creating new kinds of bodies while retaining the body as the principal site of personhood (Bonilla 2009; Cova 2015; Opas 2016).

Becoming Christian in many cases meant ‘becoming white’ or ‘civilized’ (Meiser 2015: 93; Rubenstein 2005: 32; Tym 2022: 7) and thereby taking up a powerful position relative to other groups more marginal to the goods and technology provided via Christian missions (Jacka 2005; Roth 1997; Steel 1999). Though this ‘becoming white’ may be seen as a rupture in indigenous people’s sense of self, the adoption of a foreign identity coheres with the absorption of alterity as a process constitutive of self (Fausto 1999; Vilaça 2016). In some cases, mission settlement is understood as a reformulation of historically precedent forms of indigenous subordination (Bonilla 2009; Fabiano 2018).

Yet there are reasons for scepticism toward this anthropological ‘normal science’ of cultural continuity amidst indigenous conversion. As Carlos Fausto (2009: 497) asked, ‘are we suggesting that the indigenous world is a machine capable of infinitely digesting the nonindigenous world?’ It remains a historical fact that Christian
missionisation has preceded Western colonisation and state formation (Bubandt 2014; Taylor 1999), reducing the distance between whites and indigenous people (Halbmayer 2018: 62–63) and undermining the pre-existing indigenous symbolic universe (Taylor 1981: 660–662). Christianity has been described as ‘a primary source’ of the dislocation provoked by colonialism (Pollock 1993), a point especially apt in respect of Protestant Evangelicalism. In southern Guyana, Evangelical conversion correlates with rejection of shamanism in indigenous communities (Luzar and Fragoso 2013: 305–306; see also Vilaça 2013: 373). Baniwa Evangelicals in the northwest Amazon ‘axe[d] the longhouses, burn[ed] the sacred flutes, and persecute[d] the shamans’ (Wright 2009: 505). In indigenous areas of northern Peru where Evangelicalism has become the dominant religion, a pattern of isolation and even murder of shamans has been documented (Garra 2019).

The foregoing factual reasons for scepticism about seeing cultural continuity underlying Christian conversion are matched by theoretical critique of anthropology’s bias for continuity. ‘Continuity thinking,’ it has been argued, is overdetermined by disciplinary priorities (Robbins 2007). This is held to be especially problematic for an anthropology of Christianity and its endeavour to come to terms with the global cultural logic of Christianity (Cannell 2006), because a dramatic and irreversible break with the past is inherent to many people’s experience of Christian conversion.

At the same time, there is reason for caution regarding the naïve incorporation of informants’ discourse as cultural explanation (Chua 2012: 133–134; Keane 2003: 236). This is all the more the case in the anthropology of Christianity, where Christians’ key terms are close enough to secular anthropology’s own to generate an unsettling dissonance (Cannell 2005). What are we to make, for example, of ethnographic claims that Christianity ‘is truth’ (Roberts 2012: 283) or that labour exploitation is ‘the devil’ (Sarra 2020), particularly in light of methodological injunctions to take informants seriously? How, in sum, do we go about a secular and critical anthropology of Christianity (see Jenkins 2014), taking account the world-historical changes wrought by Christianity while neither naively echoing converts’ discourse of rupture nor unreflexively reproducing continuity thinking?

The ontological approach to conversion has unexplored merits for addressing these issues. A forerunner of the approach is Aparecida Vilaça, who situates her response to the question, ‘Do animists become naturalists when converting to Christianity?’ with respect to Descola’s four-fold ontological framework. Drawing on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) model of ‘perspectivism,’ Vilaça argues that the appeal of Christianity for her ethnographic interlocutors, the Brazilian Amazonian Wari, lay in the promise of adopting God’s perspective (2015: 5–6). This meant becoming ‘leaders’—as missionary translators of Genesis phrased it in the Wari language—of all the birds and animals, firmly establishing themselves in the role of hunter or predator and, conversely, avoiding the perils of becoming prey of these same animals (see Fausto 2007). These religious changes also prompted ‘the constitution of an inner self’ as a unique property of human beings as a species, ‘as though the Wari’ were following the path of modernity analysed by a great variety of authors’ (Vilaça 2015: 6–7).
Thus, though Christianity was made to make sense to Wari’ through an animist lens, its ultimate destination was a materialist or naturalist ontology in which non-human beings were desubjectified and agency lay paradigmatically with God and, in reduced form, with humans (Vilaça 2013: 378–379). So, while making Christianity’s initial appeal to Wari’ people intelligible, Vilaça’s approach has the merit of pointing to more durable shifts post-conversion and conceptualising them structurally. The present article extends upon Vilaça’s approach and concludes that, while Evangelicalism initially resonates with the animist Shuar worldview as the ‘continuity thinking’ approach to Christian conversion posits, in the long run animists will become naturalists when converting to Evangelicalism.

Contemporary Shuar People, Animist Healing, and Evangelicalism

In Shuar territory, access to state-run biomedical care, household use of herbal remedies, and consultations with nonindigenous herbalists coexist with health practices that form part of the cultural inheritance of the Shuar and neighbouring peoples. The most significant of these is shamanic healing and hallucinogenic vision-seeking, making use of combinations of ayahuasca, datura, and tobacco, through which people are able to encounter and interact with the disembodied ‘spirits’ of non-human beings, including the plants themselves (Brown 1986; Harner 1972; Rubenstein 2012).  

Most Shuar people today consider themselves to be Catholics. While Catholic missionisation contributed to eliminating violent feuding and polygyny, Shuar Catholics perceive generations-old practices of shamanic healing and hallucinogenic vision-seeking as perfectly compatible with their Christianity (Rubenstein 1993, 2012). This is due to the conciliatory methodology of Catholic missionaries, who taught that visions induced by tobacco, ayahuasca and datura are ‘hypostases’ of God (Boster 2003: 171; Mader 1999: 160, 222; see also Shapiro 1987). By consequence, non-Evangelical Shuar today frequently use ayahuasca to induce ‘visions of the future’ and consume datura to experience a healing vision of the plant and to gain strength, self-empowerment and luck.

Surrounded in the daily life of Shuar communities by these practices based on engagement with plants and spirits, and often having grown up being given these plants to consume in their youth, converts to Protestant Evangelicalism are obliged to reckon with animism. In my experience, their universal response is one of rejection, with shamans condemned as devil-worshippers and hallucinogens rejected based on interpretations of biblical proscriptions (see Robbins 2004: 128–129). The visions seen by consuming psychoactive plants, and the shamans who make use of them, are referred to by Evangelicals as ‘Satanic’ and ‘working with the Devil’. In times of sickness Shuar Evangelicals are normatively obliged to depend on clinical biomedicine or medicinal herbs rather than shamanic healing.

Evangelical religiosity affects not only methods and materials used for healing and health-seeking but also explanations for illness. Shuar Evangelicals frequently describe illness as the result of a lack of either pious comportment or inner belief;
among Evangelicals elsewhere, this has been called ‘the medicalization of morality’ (Eves 2010: 497; see also Brown 2011: 10).

Thirdly, Evangelicalism flourishes among those who have not been able to find healing through indigenous methods. Antonio’s baby daughter died despite him seeking assistance from several indigenous shamans. After she passed from what he described as ‘some sort of maldad’—a term that references envy and sorcery—the man told me, ‘I fell into conversation with a priest during this time. And I learned the words, ‘He who believes in me will no longer be condemned by God. And he who does not believe is condemned’. Whether it is suffering provoked by, as in this instance, sickness, or by poverty or alcoholism, Evangelicalism’s prophetic message of a sudden reversal of fortune finds resonance amongst those facing crisis. Where the status quo regarding health and illness is a set of concepts and practices grounded in an animist ontology, the Evangelical message creates distance from that ontology.

These three factors are all at play in Elsa’s and Martina’s accounts of ancestral Shuar practices of healing and health-seeking, what earlier ethnographers called the ‘arútam complex’ (Harner 1972: 135–142). This ‘custom’, as Martina calls it, is well described by her here, though with a certain moral timbre characteristic of Pentecostal Christianity.

This power [arútam] was Satanic. It wasn’t from God. Our grandparents had the custom of going to the waterfall; they inhaled tobacco juice through their nostrils; they slept in the forest, at the waterfall. They wanted to catch a spirit and see God, as they thought. In this drunkenness, they found power. They would say, ‘I encountered a jaguar, which presented itself to me, but I mastered it. It transformed into a person and spoke to me, so that I may live and so that I may kill my enemy. And now I am very certain/safe (seguro) because I have to kill and nobody can kill me’. This power that they attained was not a power from God. It was a power of the Devil. So the people were very confused because they called arútam ‘God’. But God does not say, ‘Kill your brother’.

Though Martina only mentions tobacco (Shuar: tsaank), arútam vision-seeking historically made use of tobacco in combination with ayahuasca and/or datura. Martina condemns this based on the idea that it is a false communion, not with God but with the Devil. As this suggests, and as we will see further on, she and Elsa are not disputing the reality of the power attained from arútam or the visions from which that power was derived.

The significant point for the moment is that the rejection of the hallucinogenic character of ayahuasca, datura and tobacco leads Shuar Evangelicals, in an apparently naturalist mode, to an exclusive focus on the plants’ material qualities. This general aspect of Evangelicals’ health behaviours is well articulated by Elsa and Martina, who affirm the physiologically therapeutic qualities of these plants in the same way as more mundane medicinal herbs. When I asked, following the previously quoted section of the interview, whether they use these plants at all, the women replied in the affirmative.
‘We don’t do this,’ said Elsa. ‘Well, simply as remedies, yes. When one has a wound, to simply apply it, then yes.’

‘For injuries, it can be applied,’ Martina confirmed.

The women are referring here to datura’s ability, as a plaster, to reduce swelling, anaesthetise injury and speed the healing of broken bones.

‘For fever, one can also take the leaves of natém (ayahuasca) and bathe with them,’ Martina added.4

‘So they’re not used for acquiring power from visions?’ I interjected.

‘No,’ they both said. And Elsa continued, ‘This power from visions can only be given by God’.

‘Through prayer, for example?’ I suggested,

‘For example, for myself, God has made me see,’ said Elsa. ‘If I have a brother who is not walking in the path of Christ, God sends me a vision to show me….If God gives a vision, it lives’.

Ayahuasca, datura, tobacco and associated practices are the tools that make the animist ontology conceivable and workable for Shuar people. By directly disputing the legitimacy of hallucinogenic vision-seeking, Evangelical conversion prompts animist indigenous people towards a more naturalistic engagement with medicinal plants.

The Importance of Visions for Shuar Evangelicals

Without witnessing this apparent naturalism, the idea that anyone would become a ‘naturalist’ when converting to Evangelicalism seems flawed from the start. The worldview and practice of charismatic Christianity does not appear to be comparable to the deanimated universe of philosophical materialism. The Evangelical and Pentecostal cosmos has been described as ‘frankly supernatural’ (Robbins 2004: 120) and is noted for its ‘active demonological imagination’ (O’Neill 2010: 10) and ‘the emphasis that is placed on spiritual warfare’ (Lindhart 2011: 227). Evangelical churches are known for the drama of their services, including such characteristic elements as self-flagellation, glossolalia and accounts of divine possession and visions (Brahinsky 2012: 215–216; O’Neill 2010: 9), all of which also feature in Evangelical worship in Shuar territory.

The place of direct transcendent experience in charismatic Christianity bears a certain compatibility with ‘the importance of visions’ (Rubenstein 2012) in Shuar culture. During his sermon, the pastor invoked a healing vision sent by God as evidence for the correctness of the congregants’ religious path. After falling sick, the pastor said:

I went to see the shamans, and they said that they had the medicine to cure me. However these were simply sedatives. I was given a balm and I used it exactly as I was supposed to. However my body reacted and got even worse. I threw it away and said, ‘This is garbage. From now on, I am only going to believe in God’. And the miracle happened right then. I was cured right away. My illness went away.
Yet God reprehended me at the same time, and I was forced to stay in bed. During this time, I saw two angels. During my time as a Catholic, I never saw angels. And these angels were wearing such white clothes. The white that we see people wearing can't be compared to what I saw. I heard the voice of the angels. They walked up to me and touched me. One said, ‘Lift up this sick person who is in bed.’

In this example, the Evangelical pastor accepts, in an apparently animistic mode, that healing takes place via the action of spirits in a vision.

Elsa’s account of a similar illness experience demonstrates the same logic that sickness and health derive from an immaterial aspect of reality accessed during visions:

A spirit of the world entered me, the witchcraft of a witch-doctor (‘brujo’), doing evil/sorcery (‘maldad’). I was already on the path of being Evangelical at this time. So what could I do? The only thing I could do was cast my gaze up to God in heaven, praying and fasting. Then, in a dream, a Señor arrived, just like yourself [a white man], the demeanour and everything.

[…] ‘I am an Evangelist’, he was saying. ‘I am the one who heals the sick. I don't heal with remedies, with anything’. And as he made these exhortations, I was struck down by a powerful wind. This cleansed me, via this dream. And after this, pah!, I awoke. My head had been hurting me: my head, body, belly, everything. Then, nothing! I didn't feel any pain at all when I woke up. All the pain left me.

As we can see, Shuar Evangelicals continue to situate fundamental causation in the immaterial, a domain somehow more ‘true’ for Shuar people than material reality, as has been noted by ethnographers for generations (Harner 1972: 135; Meiser 2015: 164; Rubenstein 2012: 40). Thus, it may be said that, in line with the cultural continuity thesis, Evangelicalism appeals to Shuar people by virtue of its compatibility with existing ontological tenets.

So religious conversion is not a matter of an immediate shift in ontological structure—animism to naturalism—among contemporary Shuar. Yet Evangelicalism is nonetheless prompting significant change, as Shuar people condemn core elements of life for many of their contemporaries while adopting materialist or naturalist engagements with plants, like ayahuasca, tobacco and datura, that other Shuar say have a ‘living spirit’. What might be the ontological significance of these changes in the long term?

Part of the difficulty in conceptualising the effects of Christian conversion in animist socio-cultural contexts comes from the multiplicity of ways the concept of animism is being used. Developed as an analytical tool for ontological comparison across cultures—that is, in making difference more intelligible—animism is now just as often invoked to justify totalising claims on social theory in the singular. This is often bundled with normative ‘post-dualist’ (Hornborg 2021) approaches that see themselves as overcoming the mechanistic worldview and other allegedly outdated and repressive qualities of Western thought (e.g. Astor-Aguilera and Harvey 2018; Braidotti 2013; Ingold 2016). This is far from what was intended by those who are
closest to understanding animist peoples. As Descola comments for the Achuar, ‘The relation of plants and animals to humans is not metaphorical’ (1992: 114). Likewise, in dialogue with Amazonian Kichwa, Eduardo Kohn responds to ‘new materialism’ (Bennett 2010) by arguing that the analytical treatment of anything of significance as having agency ‘blinds us to the kinds of agency that do in fact exist beyond the human’ (Kohn 2013: 91).

Rather than grouping all ‘non-humans’ together and presenting human relations with them as evidence of animism, concepts like the ‘meta-person’ (Gose 2018; Graeber and Sahlins 2017) elucidate the mismatched agency of humans and powerful others such as mountains (Gose 2018), the dead (Halbmayer 2019; Salas Carreño 2019), *Inkas* (Brabec de Mori 2019) and kings (Graeber and Sahlins 2017). Analysing the power and politics of people’s relations with meta-persons tells us more about the possibilities of social and cultural life than simply evincing an ontological alternative to materialism.

**Evangelicalism and Visionary Agency among Shuar People**

In Shuar Evangelicals’ accounts of illness and healing, their world is clearly not a purely materialist one, but it also differs from the relative egalitarianism of animist inter-species relations. What can we learn about the changes wrought by Evangelical conversion through attention to the new modes of relation it establishes?

There is a point worth clarifying in Elsa’s foregoing account. When she asks rhetorically, ‘What could I do?’, she is referencing the fact that the standard recourse upon suffering from sorcery would be to seek treatment from a healing shaman. Having already distanced herself from their practice by converting to Evangelicalism, that option is not open to her. This implies that her rejection of shamanism is not based on perceiving shamanic healing as ineffective.

Evangelicals commonly claim that shamans are ‘Satanic’ or ‘work with the Devil’. Such base condemnations of evil can lead to a misleadingly simple picture of Evangelicals’ contentions. When I asked the Evangelical pastor after the service about some shamans’ claim that they heal in collaboration with God, he responded as follows:

—No! Before, we used to believe this, but it doesn’t say this in the Bible. Jesus doesn’t say anything about this. My sister, who has now been converted to Christ, she was performing this type of black magic (*magia*). She tells about how Satan was using her as an instrument. And she would tell about how she would touch a sick person and they would be cured. But these are false miracles. Through false powers and Satan, many people are cured.
—So you’re saying that they [shamans] can cure through Satan?
—Yes. Satan performs miracles. However, they are false. God himself cures. I myself have been cured by God.

So even though Evangelicals ground the legitimacy of the Biblical God on stories of divine intervention to heal the sick, they are not dismissing shamanism by arguing that shamans cannot heal. Like in Elsa and Martina’s account of the *aritam*
complex, the pastor does not call the existential reality of visions into question. In this sense, conversion to Evangelicalism does not prompt, properly speaking, an ontological shift or dispute; rather, conversion and ‘ontological preservation’ of the existing indigenous conceptual structure occur side by side (Robbins 2011: 421). Instead, the claim is that shamanic healing and vision-seeking is somehow wrong or ‘false’ in a moral rather than existential way.

But why are shamanic healing and vision-seeking accorded a lower value among Shuar Evangelicals? The following narrative of illness and healing, recorded in a one-on-one conversation at the home of a non-Evangelical Shuar man, provides a useful point of contrast. Like Elsa and the pastor, the man also claimed to have been healed via visionary experience, but his healing was not the product of prayer but rather of drinking a concoction made from the datura plant.

‘I drank it when I was injured here,’ the man told me, indicating his foot, ‘And it cured me. In dreams I saw doctors coming to help me and the next day I woke up healthy’.

‘Did you apply it to your skin as well?’ I asked.

‘Yes. On the skin. That’s how I was cured’.

‘What were the doctors like that you saw?’

‘They were white people and they came here and cured me’.

‘Were they white men like me?’

‘Yes. That’s how they were. They were the force of the plant, that is to say, the spirit of the plant, which came and cured me. By the second day I was cured’.

This account has ontological and aesthetic parallels with Elsa’s, but a distinct relational dynamic. The principal difference lies in the character of their saviours: in the Catholic man’s datura account, the healers were identifiable beings and co-habitants in the man’s own world, who can easily be located as the spirit of a specific plant, even as they took on the form of ‘doctors’ in order to heal. Similar encounters with the ‘doctor’ spirits recur in illness narratives among non-Evangelical Shuar throughout the region, and such accounts parallel those of earlier ethnographers regarding direct interaction with the ‘spirits’ of plants during hallucinogenic visionary healing (e.g. Brown 1978: 123, 128–129; Mader 1999: 211–212). By contrast, in Elsa’s vision, the white Evangelist seemingly arrived from nowhere in response to her supplication. His identity and provenance remained unknown to her but must have been somewhere up above, to where she directed her prayers.

Elsa’s account is mirrored in an account of Evangelical conversion recounted by Anna Meiser (2015: 162–163). The convert, an Achuar former shaman named Pinchu Sumpa, is made ill by a rival shaman. During a feverish dream, an angel appears, saying, ‘I give you life, and in this new life you are going to work for the word of God.’ Sumpa describes his subsequent struggles with Christian life due to his illiteracy and then says that in another dream an angel bequeathed the ability to read upon him. As in the vision of Elsa, the angel is unnamed, of unknown provenance, and the vision-seeker has no way to oblige the angel to come. In contrast to the active engagement with plants like datura and ayahuasca, the Evangelical
visionary experience is characterised by supplication before unidentified figures who are more powerful than the seeker.

Both Elsa’s and Pinchu’s accounts are reminiscent of Vilaça’s account of Wari’ shamans’ failed search (in visions) for the house of God: God remained invisible to them and, having apparently no body, it was impossible for the Wari’ to have an intelligible form of kinship with him (2013: 378). Liana Chua concludes similarly that Christianity introduced a new ‘verticality’ in the modes of relation that characterise the rituals practised by the Bidayuh Christians in Malaysian Borneo (2015: 348). Among Navajo converts, Evangelicalism replaced relations of ‘reciprocity’ with the spirits with ‘petitions’ to God (Marshall 2015: 405).

This evidence suggests that although visions clearly play a key role in healing for Evangelicals, there is a different kind of relationship or orientation to visions demanded of those who have converted to Evangelicalism. Conversion cannot then be encapsulated as a shift in ontological content. Rather, it arises from moral invocations about the preferred mode of relating to the immaterial aspects of reality and the subjects they contain.

The essence of this moralisation of ontology is a particular way of experiencing spiritual transcendence and relating to non-ordinarily visible aspects of reality. This emerges in the position one is expected to adopt when exercising the central element of healing according to Evangelicals: prayer. Elsa put it as follows:

I always tell my sisters, ‘When you need to be cured, go first to God.’ Because the Bible says, the evil spirit that has entered your body can only be removed by fasting and praying…. One has to pray. It’s the same with the head of the church. He has to pray. It’s not that he as a person is capable of curing on his own; rather, through this person the prayer to God comes back down from heaven and heals.

There is both an egalitarianism and hierarchy in spiritual worth at play here. A pastor is not, like a shaman, situated in a superior position to others with respect to visionary agency. At the same time, this equality is the product of a permanent hierarchy with respect to God. The limit of human spiritual agency is to petition God to heal, according to the Evangelicals, from a position of supplication; this contrasts with calling the spirit of the datura plant to heal or seeking out a self-empowering vision of one’s future through use of ayahuasca. While not contesting the ontological veracity of healing visions originating on normally invisible planes of reality, Evangelicalism establishes a very different, subordinate human subjectivity with respect to such forces.

This makes sense of a widespread illness typology among the Shuar population as a whole, including Catholics: ‘illnesses of man’ versus ‘illnesses of God’. The former attributes sickness to shamanic attacks motivated by sorcery; the latter are considered naturally occurring (see also Ventura i Oller 2019: 135). Historically, Amazonians had little concept of ‘natural causes’ explanations for illnesses, and mid- to late-twentieth century ethnographers also reported surprisingly little interest in herbal remedies (Davis and Yost 1983: 284; Descola 1996: 235–237).
Its centrality in these new categories indicates Christianity’s role in encouraging indigenous people to conceive of their everyday actions in materialist terms.

**Modes of Relation and Orientation to Ontological Content**

Shuar Evangelicals are engaged in a complex process of what Amazonianists frequently term ‘transformation’. They express their disdain for visionary healing and empowerment promoted by hallucinogenic plants, turning instead to biomedicine, the physiological properties of medicinal plants, and prayer. Yet in light of the ongoing importance of visions for Shuar Evangelicals, they cannot be said yet to have become naturalists in terms of the content of their ontological commitments. The historical, propositional view of religion as defined by its ontological beliefs—that is, its particular view of what is real and not real—only tells part of the story. Contemporary shamanism and the ancestral ontology from which it has evolved are not being critiqued by Shuar Evangelicals in ontological terms. Instead, they moralise ontology, such that even real and effective practices are ethically condemned and marginalised if they do not arise through submission before God.

All of this shows that cultural and ontological change, while interrelated, are not synonymous. The conversion of Shuar people to Protestant Evangelicalism is only intelligible by considering not just the content of Evangelicals’ ontological suppositions but also the new mode of engaging with immaterial aspects of the world for which they advocate. In assessing this, the apparent activity and spectacle of Evangelicalism may be misleading. As Martin Lindhart noted, while adherents of charismatic Christianity ‘do not perceive themselves as puppets that are passively moved by sacred forces’, it is also true that they consider that the ‘role of humans mainly consists in seeking divine power and protection’ (2011: 233–234).

Lindhart’s term here, ‘protection’, returns us to Descola’s four-part ontological schema and the ‘modes of relation’ he argued are more and less compatible with each ontology (2013: 309–335). Without entirely ‘becoming naturalists’ and abandoning the reality of the immaterial, the ethnographic data presented here suggest that Shuar Evangelicals’ mode of relation is shifting from visionary agency and self-empowerment to a hierarchical one of supplication and petitioning for protection.

While Christianity necessarily brings new ethical inflections, the nature of the shift in this instance goes beyond Robbins’ model of a hierarchy of values according to which certain features or personages of ancestral ontologies are acceptable and others unacceptable (2011: 415). Instead, by favouring a relational mode of protection and submission in engagements with immaterial aspects of reality, Evangelicalism limits believers’ agency on the plane of visions and thereby ultimately increases the emphasis on the material properties of the world. In this, Shuar Evangelicals’ health practices demonstrate a mechanism connecting Christian conversion with the ‘purification’ between nature and culture, subject and object that has been held to be typical of the modern, naturalist state of being (Keane 2007;
Christian Modernisation in Amazonia

Latour 1993), while also making sense of the historical fact of Christianity’s role as a forerunner of Western colonisation and nation-state formation.

The notion of perversion may help to reconcile two leading structural models of cultural change: Robbins's (2011) concern with value hierarchies within ontologies and Descola’s (2013) preferred modes of relation for each given ontology. It is not literally unthinkable for Shuar Evangelicals to seek out power and agency in their hallucinogenic plant-inspired interactions with immaterial forces. Nonetheless, like domesticating a peccary for animists who view the peccary as normatively an independent subject (Descola 2013: 379–386), it is considered somehow against the order of things and would most likely fade out of common practice and then common knowledge, were Shuar people to convert to Evangelicalism en masse. This is not, however, best understood in accordance with an abstract doctrinal ‘value’ but in terms of values as derived from a prior, culturally particular understanding of the natural and given order of the world.

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Notes

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1. The names are pseudonyms.

2. In Amazonia, a limit case of animism are the spirit masters or ‘owners’ of game animals (Costa 2017; Fausto 2008). The masters of game, and indeed many game animals themselves, are more powerful than human beings and capable of causing them harm. Yet humans are also able to best, deceive and remain concealed from them, an impossible task when faced with the omnipotence accorded to the Christian God.

3. Ayahuasca (Banisteriopsis caapi mixed with Psychotria viridis) and datura (Brugmansia spp.) are potent hallucinogenic plants with a long history of use in indigenous cultures in Amazonia. The tobacco referred to is Nicotiana rustica, a more potent species than the Nicotiana tabacum used in industrially manufactured cigarettes.

4. The leaves are soaked in a bucket of water, which is then used to bathe.
Christian Tym

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