

TALKING ABOUT SHAMANS

'Shaman' is a term, like 'totem' or 'taboo', which has been taken from a particular ethnographic context and applied more widely. It is now part of the common parlance of anthropologists, particularly those working on societies in Asia, the Arctic, Oceania and the Americas. The shaman is considered a specialist, a person set apart by his or her ability to make controlled contact with spirits and so influence the course of events. Often shamanism depends on the possession of special instruments and on the dramatic use of trance. These seem to reflect and emphasise the distinction between shamans and laymen and, indeed, experientially, for the observer, to give the separate status of the shaman the power of a self-evident reality. Certainly, from a cursory review of the literature on shamanism - in ethnographies, in typologies of religion, and in general accounts - it is striking how many proceed by primary reference to a separable body of specialists. Research into medico-religious practices is framed by this image and normally it is expected that fieldwork will reveal concrete instances of shamans or at least traces of their earlier presence.

Logically, however, there is no reason to privilege this perspective and its widespread use is something which, in itself, requires explanation. Empirically, there are grounds to question its merits. When reading ethnographies of lowland South America one's suspicions are aroused by reports that 'approximately one out of every four Jivaro men is a shaman' (Harner 1973: 154), that among various Tukanoan groups whole sibs may be called Kumua and yet shamanic individuals within those sibs are singled out by the same term (e.g. C. Hugh-Jones 1977: 31-6), and that while 'all Piaroa men are Ruwang' (Kaplan 1975: 45), Ruwang is the name given to shamans and to 'the Piaroa politico-religious leader, the "man of thoughts"' (ibid).

These examples suggest that it is necessary to look more closely at indigenous language use. This does not mean merely substituting the native word for the presupposed shamanic expert or for the apparently self-evident displays of shamanic activity. Clearly it is important to know whether actions which seem shamanic or which are being performed by someone previously referred to by the indigenous term that has been glossed as 'shaman' are, in fact, spoken of in the same way by the Indians themselves. This paper attempts, through a more detailed study of the Tukanoan case, to indicate some of the problems with the traditional perspective, to outline an alternative approach, and to suggest why the traditional one has been so pervasive. To do this it is necessary to ask what is going on when we talk about shamans and, equally, what the Indians themselves are saying and doing when they use terms such as Ruwang and Kumua.

I

Eliade defines 'classic' shamanism as controlled communication with spirits, involving the soul in an ascent to the sky or a descent to the underworld (1964: 3-8). He distinguishes shamanism from spirit possession (ibid 5-6) and in this respect is followed by de Heusch (1962). Lewis, on the other hand, argues that spirit possession is a constitutive feature of shamanism. He maintains that

To settle this issue we must go back to the main primary accounts of Arctic shamanism utilized by Eliade and also by de Heusch ... [particularly] the Arctic Tungus from whose language the word shaman derives, and whom, therefore we may take to epitomize the phenomena under discussion (1971: 50-1).

This is unsatisfactory in two respects. First, Eliade himself had written earlier that

... Tungus shamanism as it exists today cannot be considered a "classic" form of shamanism, precisely because of the predominant importance it accords to the incarnation of "spirits" and the small role played by ascent to the sky (1964: 500).

secondly, and more importantly, both Eliade and Lewis presuppose a 'true' shamanism in relation to which aberrant definitions can be dismissed or aberrant forms rationalised, while relying on specific empirical instances to establish their own 'truths'. Definitions, however, cannot be refuted empirically: apparent exceptions can always be accounted for as variations or simply as falling outside the field as specified. The argument rapidly becomes circular. An important if familiar principle is at stake: language should not be treated as a nomenclature, labelling a self-evident and given reality; nor should it be assumed that the meaning of a term is a class of empirical referents. Ostensive reference is only a provisional as well as a potentially misleading clue to meaning, a point relevant to our understanding not only of the term 'shaman' but also of indigenous terms which are treated as equivalent.

There can be no authoritative definition of either 'shaman' or 'shamanism'. To understand their meanings it is necessary to consider the circumstances of their use, both in general accounts and in particular ethnographies. Thus, for example, the different definitions suggested by Eliade, de Heusch and Lewis must be seen in the light of their attempts to provide, respectively, a contribution to the general history of religions, a formal analysis of religious experience, and a sociological account of ecstatic religion. Nonetheless, it is possible to say, following Firth, that 'the most general usage of shaman denotes a specialist in healing, divination and allied social functions' (1964: 638), though it is preferable to add that this is held to operate by means of contact with spirits rather than accept his narrower assertion that 'techniques of spirit possession and spirit control' (ibid) are employed. Similarly, 'the most significant criterion of shamanism is taken to be the state attained by the practitioner - that of dissociation, trance behaviour or "ecstasy"' (ibid: 639; emphasis original), it normally being the case that such a state is entered voluntarily and that, whatever its outward signs, it implies a degree of control on the part of the practitioner.

These definitions highlight the question of perspective. One emphasises the position of the specialist, the other emphasises an action or a state-controlled contact with spirits - which might be open to many if not all members of a society. Studies of shamanism almost invariably give primacy to the position of the shaman as a specialist, often someone observably distinct from the laymen around him. According to Eliade shamans are 'persons who stand out in their

respective societies... They are separated from the rest of the community by the intensity of their own religious experience' (1964:8), and form a 'small mystical elite' (ibid). 'The shaman begins his new, his true life by a "separation"' (ibid:13). Firth maintains that 'shamanism denotes that particular form of spirit mediumship in which a specialist (the shaman)... is deemed to exercise developed techniques of control over spirits' (1964: 638). Turner, in The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, places shamanism within a classification of religious specialisations (1974), while Létraux (1949) and Jackson (1975), in the more specific context of South America, characterize shamanism solely in terms of the activities of specialist shamans. Almost all the literature on the Tukanoans in the Vaupés approaches shamanism in the same way.

II

The Vaupés forms part of the Northwest Amazon and is a region of tropical rain forest in which population density is low. There are very roughly seven thousand Tukanoans in the area. They do not define themselves as a unit or act corporately as such, but instead are identified primarily by linguistic criteria. There are approximately twenty Tukanoan groups, among which are the Barasana, Taiwano, Desana, Bará and Cubeo. Most of these groups are recognised as exogamous and as speaking distinct 'dialects' or 'languages'. Exogamous groups are divisible into sib and both are patrilineal. The traditional settlement is a single longhouse occupied by a number of nuclear families, the men of which are normally close genealogical relatives identified with a particular sib. Women are exchanged between longhouses associated with different exogamous groups and, as a result, a longhouse always includes members of two and typically four or five different groups. Fishing, hunting, gardening and gathering are the main sources of food. Longhouse sites may change and communities may split up for a variety of reasons. There is also a great deal of travel in the area and most longhouses include a number of more or less temporary guests, adding to the mixture of different sib and exogamous group members in a longhouse at any one time. Although each exogamous group is identified loosely with a particular area and each sib, ideally, with a particular longhouse site, in fact sib members are dispersed widely in separate longhouse communities and a neighbourhood contains longhouses associated with a variety of exogamous groups. Although the Indians live off the land, they do not claim to own it. There is virtually no pressure on land and concomitantly no real sense of territory. In this apparent state of constant movement order does not derive primarily from the hierarchical and reciprocal relations between absolutely named and given groups within an observably bounded whole, nor from a universally recognised set of social offices. Instead, it is expressed in the common traditional recognition of the authority of a number of principles by which individuals and communities organise the world around them and act upon it. Relations around a naming subject, be it an individual, a longhouse community or a sib, are at the root of Tukanoan social classification and action.

Some of the earliest accounts of Indian life in the Vaupés come from Wallace and Spruce. Both travelled extensively in the Amazon around the middle of the nineteenth century, reaching the Vaupés in the

early 1850's. Both refer in some detail to the payés, pagés or shamans, of the area, their reports largely typifying the way in which hamanism was portrayed prior to intensive fieldwork. According to Wallace:

They have numerous "Pagés", a kind of priests, answering to the "medicine-men" of the North American Indians. These are believed to have great power: they cure all diseases by charms, applied by strong blowing and breathing upon the party to be cured, and by the singing of certain songs and incantations. They are also believed to have power to kill enemies, to bring or send away rain, to destroy dogs or game, to make the fish leave a river, and to afflict with various diseases. They are much consulted and believed in, and are well paid for their services. An Indian will give almost all his wealth to a pagé, when he is threatened with any real or imaginary danger (1889: 347).

In addition, it was the payé's job to propitiate the pervasive evil spirit "juruparí", or Devil (ibid: 348). Spruce creates a similar picture, mentioning in addition the special apparatus and insignia which set the payé apart. He also describes a dramatic cure at some length (1908: II: 430-44).

More recent and much more detailed descriptions are provided by Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971; 1975; 1976 a, b). Indeed, shamanism is central to much of his work on the area. Initially, for the Desana, he distinguishes two types of religious specialist, the ye'e ('shaman' or 'payé' or 'jaguar') and the kumú ('priest') (1971), though this distinction is less apparent in his later works. Both, however, correspond to the traditional image of specialists as an objectively separable body of men. He mentions at some length not only their insignia of office, their conduct of dramatic cures and their receipt of payment, but also a specific and lengthy period of apprenticeship. In addition, particular emphasis is placed on the ability of the ye'e to turn into a jaguar. For Reichel-Dolmatoff there is a radical and simple distinction between specialists and laymen. Referring to the Desana 'congregation of the faithful' (1971: 249), he writes:

The kumú (or kumús) are at the apex of the pyramid together with the five to eight recognized payés. These form the hierarchy. Below them are the headmen of the sib, approximately thirty, all of whom are older men. Then come one hundred and fifty heads of nuclear families... The young initiated, approximately sixty, form the base. These five categories, a total of some two hundred and fifty individuals, form the active and participating congregation (ibid).

Other research, based on lengthy fieldwork, seems to confirm this picture in several respects. Goldman (1963), for the Cubeo, and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1974), for the Parasana, for example, refer to a specific period of apprenticeship and Goldman continues to give some emphasis to curing rituals. He distinguishes two types of shaman, the pariekokú (man of power) and the yaví (jaguar), the latter being not only more

powerful but also more capable of inflicting harm by turning into a jaguar (1963: 262-70). Stephen Hugh-Jones, and also Langdon, refer to an ordinary shaman, Humu, but also note that the most powerful shamans are 'sometimes referred to as yai, jaguar' (S. Hugh-Jones 1974: 103) or that on occasions shamans are considered capable of turning into jaguars (Langdon 1975: 161). Men described by these various terms seem to stand apart from other Indians, as objects of fear or respect.

In other ways, however, field research suggests that the situation is more fluid than is implied in the writings of Reichel-Dolmatoff and the earlier travellers, and prompts a re-examination of their evidence and arguments. It may be argued, of course, that variations in evidence are solely a function of local variables such as exogamous group practice, environment or degree of 'white' influence. Certainly, it is necessary to avoid too syncretistic an approach and these variables are not without significance, but there remain grounds for suggesting that a particular frame of reference has influenced the collection and presentation of data. Torres Laborde's account of Barasana mythology and culture (1971) corresponds very much more closely to Reichel-Dolmatoff's approach than to that of Langdon or the Hugh-Jones; Reichel-Dolmatoff himself is willing to generalise many of his conclusions for the area as a whole; and, indeed, when the information collected from the traditional perspective is examined more closely, purely internal inconsistencies and contradictions are revealed.

The references to an enabling apprenticeship and to the acquisition of insignia of office may be taken as an example. These two issues, in fact, largely reduce to one, for it is during the period of training that the novice is held to gain many of the ceremonial objects, as well as knowledge of myths, charts and genealogies, which subsequently imbue him with shamanic power and provide ostensive markers of his position. Both the apprenticeship and the insignia seem to endorse the objective separability of shamans. On closer inspection, however, there are several reasons for reconsidering their significance.

Reichel-Dolmatoff maintains that the apprenticeship for a shaman takes place over a period ranging from a few months to a year and that 'generally, the apprentice goes to another phratry or tribe [exogamous group] to be instructed there at the side of a famous payé' (1971: 127). yet almost all the aspects of oral tradition - the myths, chants and genealogies - are held to be the exclusive property of either particular sibs or particular exogamous groups. In such a situation it would be impossible for an outsider, a member of another exogamous group, to pass them on. There seems to be some misunderstanding of what the Indians are saying.

Secondly, it is not clear that the alleged period of apprenticeship is radically distinct from other learning sessions which might be repeated often during an individual's life. Reichel-Dolmatoff himself records periodic gatherings in which 'a group of men, perhaps three or four of them, will ask a payé to teach them how to cure certain diseases or how to harm their enemies' (1975: 96). The description of these sessions is very similar to accounts of both male initiation and the shaman's apprenticeship and, indeed, Reichel-Dolmatoff on occasion refers to the participants as 'apprentices' and to the sessions as 'shamanistic reunions'. Although a number of other sources refer to a special period

of apprenticeship, Jangdon mentions that no such event was described to him and that the requisite knowledge apparently was passed on by the more learned members of a group over a prolonged period (1975: 198). The gradual acquisition of knowledge, power and interpretative skills seems more important than any single period of training.

This is endorsed by a third consideration, the fact that many of the things said to be obtained during the apprenticeship can be, and are, acquired in other ways and, concomitantly, are open in principle to all adult men and in practice to many of them. According to Stephen Hugh-Jones, shamanic skill is based on the ability to acquire, remember and clearly interpret as many myths and chants as possible. Many of these aspects of a group's tradition are passed on during male initiation and in more informal contexts before and after this by the older and more knowledgeable members of the group. Reichel-Dolmatoff himself suggests that one of the personal qualities which a man should demonstrate from childhood onwards in order to be considered capable of acting as a shaman is 'a profound interest in the religious traditions of his culture' (1975: 127) and 'a good knowledge of myths, genealogies and invocations' (ibid). The capacity to contact the spirits in a controlled way, through the use of drugs, is also developed gradually from initiation onwards by all adult men, under the supervision of skilled practitioners in both private drug-taking sessions and on ceremonial occasions (e.g. S. Hugh-Jones 1974: 119). Similarly, many of the ceremonial and ritual implements and decorations said to be obtained during shamanic initiation can be obtained elsewhere, by other means. Some are passed down through an individual's immediate patriline, generally on the death of their previous user. The individual thus acts conditionally as their user or bearer, rather than as their owner, and does not necessarily acquire them at a time coincident with any supposed period of training. In the same way, certain decorations are handed out by the local headman, the 'father' of the settlement, at ceremonies, different decorations marking off different roles for the duration of the occasion. These articles can also be obtained by trade, by manufacture (under supervision) and in the past, it is said, by warfare, one of the primary aims of raiding being the capture of other peoples' ornaments. The possession of these various objects is recognised as a marker of power and prestige, but the capacity to obtain them is not restricted to a specific period of apprenticeship. An ambitious and well-placed individual can acquire them in a number of ways. Nor is it clear that specific insignia are universally recognised as distinguishing a shaman from other men of power. Goldman notes, for the cubeo, that the distribution of objects traditionally associated with shamans, such as girdles of jaguar teeth and armadillo vestments, is neither uniform between sibs nor intrinsic to the status of shaman. They are 'symbols of shamanistic power' (1963: 154) but 'they are not shamanistic insignia' (ibid) and the same may be said of the quartz cylinders found in the area. Several of the insignia and objects of power, for example the splinters and crystals implanted in the apprentice's body, are considered invisible for long periods of time. Others, such as the skins of jaguars and anacondas which are held to mark off shamans and to enable them to disguise themselves as these animals, sound more substantial and visible. As Reichel-Dolmatoff notes, however, the word for 'skin' is used also in a broader and more abstract manner to describe a state or mood. He writes:

when speaking of the jaguar skin or garment our informants employed the term surirō. Although this is the common word used to designate any garment or attire, be it of cloth or bark, it is also used to describe a particular state, in the sense of a person's being invested with, that is clad in certain qualities. The elder informants - and we have no reason to doubt their words - insisted that it was in this sense that the transformation had to be understood. In fact, it became clear that many emotional attitudes could be described by this term, it being understood that on these occasions the person was imagined as being covered by a kind of invisible envelope expressing his mood or state (1971: 125).

Thus Indian statements which apparently refer to objective entities can, in fact, refer to qualities or transient states open to the subjective assessment of observers.

Knowledge and power are represented often as embodied in or consequent on the possession of objects or substances available in principle to all adult men. Although Goldman points to a special period of apprenticeship for the pariékoki (ibid: 264-5), he also stresses the importance of the concept of power in relationships not only between the two types of shaman, but also between the shamans and the so-called laymen. All Cubeo value and see this power and, in various ways and to varying degrees, are able to accumulate it over time.

The native term for power is parié, a term that applies to the strength and vigour of a warrior, the magical potency of the ancestral flutes and trumpets, the awesome fierceness of the jaguar, as well as the clearly magical powers of the shaman or of the laymen who has learned how to cure and to practice sorcery (ibid 262).

Finally, there is no evidence that even if an individual undergoes some more esoteric form of instruction than his peers that this, in itself, distinguishes him radically from those around him or that it enables him immediately to act as a shaman. According to Reichel-Dolmatoff, training takes place at around the age of twenty five (1971: 127), yet references to shamans almost invariably emphasise their seniority and experience.

These various factors call into question the existence of a single, enabling period of apprenticeship and a concomitant set of objective markers of status. The gradual acquisition of knowledge, power and interpretative skill seems more important than any such initiation and further undermine the picture of a radical and simple distinction between specialist shamans and laymen. Behind the appearance of a separable body of shamans lie differences of degree between adult men.

In what ways do these differences of degree become concretised terminologically by the ascription of terms such as pariékoki, kumú, or yeye? Subjective factors seem critical. The statement 'he is a shaman', or 'he is a jaguar', seems to rely to a large extent on personal or consensual appreciation of a particular state (or 'skin') which, perhaps only temporarily, another person, or other people, are held to fill.

Lévi-Strauss has pointed out that a vital element in the 'shamanistic complex' is the social consensus as to the powers of the shaman, though he makes his argument unnecessarily narrow by confining it to the instance of curing and to the role of the group as participant in the cure. He observes that

the fundamental problem revolves around the relationship between the individual and the group, or, more accurately, the relationship between a specific category of individuals and specific expectations of the group (1963: 180).

He sums this up, aphoristically, by observing that Quesalid did not become a great shaman because he cured his patients; he cured his patients because, in the eyes of the group he was a great shaman (ibid). It is not sufficient either to undergo the qualifying experiences, or to possess knowledge; it is necessary to have these factors recognised.

In the Tukanóan case what is being recognised is a degree of skill considered sufficient to enable a particular individual to occupy a specific position. Certainly, the Barasana evidence suggests that the position of shaman may be a role necessary for certain ritual occasions. The position will be filled by the person considered most competent to do so: people recognised as shamans may occupy as well the role of headman; at male initiation 'if there is a shaman in the house, he will be asked to officiate at the dance, otherwise a guest from another house must be asked to fulfil this role. Sometimes the host himself acts as either shaman or lead-dancer' (S. Hugh-Jones 1974: 22-3). However, the position of shaman is not equivalent to an 'office' because it does not operate in a single context, at a single level of extension. Different ceremonies, from the domestic cure to the inter-longhouse gathering, have different socio-geographical ranges and each context entails a shamanic position. The situation is best summarised by Christine Hugh-Jones:

At present, possession of one ritual role does not exclude an individual from possessing another and for any specialist role there are degrees of competence and recognition. Within a large longhouse there is usually at least one individual with some degree of competence in each of the roles of chief, dancer/chanter and shaman... In a set of longhouse groups that meet regularly for ritual purposes, there will be at least one important ritual specialist shaman, one chanter and one dancer of wide renown; thus the distribution of the ritual roles depends largely on the fact that they are indispensable for the functioning of a ritual community... The general lack of consistent role identification for individuals within the social structure together with the need to fill the roles results in a system of specialisation resting more upon relative personal aptitudes and ambitions than social structural status (1977: 34).

Terms such as kumú and ye'e thus seem to describe positions, states or 'skins' rather than a separable group of people. This image is reinforced by a closer examination of other ways in which they are used. kumú, or the cognate form gumú, refers to the main longitudinal beam of the longhouse, to the long tongues of rock which are scattered through

the forest, and to a bench or stool (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971: 106, 135-6; Jangdon 1975: 68). Ye'e, or yai, refers to the central houseposts, while the term for houseposts is also used for the steep pinnacles of rock in the area, and for star (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971: 106; Jangdon 1975: 68, 75). It also, of course, refers to the jaguar and, more generally, to predators including anacondas and eagles (e.g. Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971: 129; S. Hugh-Jones 1974: 138). Three points are important here. First, the terms are used to describe constitutive features of the structure of the longhouse and of the earth, necessary parts of a given whole. Secondly, the same terms refer to structured wholes on radically different scales. Thirdly, the rocks or mountains are described frequently as the longhouses of the ancestors or of the animals and their spirit guardians, and, more generally, all the things covered by these terms are spoken of as places where individuals make contact with spirits. These various points challenge the assumption that words such as kumú and ye'e identify a separable group of specialists and demand a reconsideration of suggestions that the shaman (ye'e) turns into a jaguar (ye'e). The relationship between the people and the positions described by the words is contingent in two senses: the states may be experienced only transiently, the skins occupied only temporarily; and the positions themselves may cover a wide range of socio-geographical referents. Undoubtedly, from a particular point of view, everything will appear as if there were a group of people objectively qualified and widely recognised as shamans, but it seems more advantageous to approach this situation from a different perspective. Just as it is wrong to assume that the 'true' meaning of 'shamanism' lies in an empirically separable set of Tungus specialists, so it is wrong to assume that the 'true' or primary meaning of these terms is a separable set of Tukanoan specialists and that their use in other contexts is merely derivative or metaphorical.

kumú and ye'e describe positions, but more than this their use implies the creation or recognition of a relationship between people occupying different positions in a given context. Thus not only can an individual be described as occupying the position of kumú in relation to a particular individual or community, but whole sib can be described by members of another sib as 'our shamans' or as shamans in relation to a third group. In all this the position of the naming subject is crucial. This does not apply only to the subjective assessment of degrees of skill or transient states. In a purely relational system of naming there are no absolute terms. Only from a particular point of view, that of the naming subject, does there appear to be an intrinsic identity between the name and the object so described. Kinship terminologies exemplify this. It seems useful, in the Tukanoan context, to regard statements such as 'he is a shaman' or 'he is a jaguar' as analogous to statements such as 'he is a brother' or 'he is a cross-cousin'. In such a situation it is impossible, taking the Tukanoans as a whole, or indeed any locality in the Vaupés, to count the number of shamans. Indeed, it is as meaningless as proposing to count the number of cross-cousins in a society. Counting can only take place from a particular part of view, but even here the association between categories and people is ultimately contingent. The Tukanoans themselves recognise that, in the last resort, terms such as 'cross-cousin' and 'brother' describe positions rather than people. Particular groups that were once cross-cousins can become brothers and vice-versa. In the Vaupés at least, it may be more advantageous to approach shamanism from the point of view of a naming

subject occupying a given position in a system of relations than from that of an apparently separable body of specialists. This is not to challenge a supposed 'reality' by appeal to a relativism which merely takes at face value the 'ideology' of the people being studied. It is to recognise that what the Tukanoans say is central to how shamanism works for them, and to challenge the simple formula that counts as 'true' what we observe while ascribing to 'ideology' those indigenous statements that fail to match this 'truth'.

On the face of it, however, there remains a solid body of evidence which confirms the traditional image. There are frequent references to shamans as professional specialists acting on behalf of unqualified laymen and, in the early accounts at least, to dramatic cures in which the separability of the shamans seemed confirmed. Yet it is striking how little has, in fact, been observed. Spruce, the nineteenth century traveller, provides a candid but startling admission:

I have never been so fortunate as to see a genuine payé at work. Among the civilised Indians the Christian padre has supplanted the pagan payé, who has besides been discountenanced and persecuted by the civil authorities; so that if any now exist, he must exercise his office in secret. With the native and still unchristianised tribes I have for the most part held only passing intercourse during some of my voyages. Once I lived for seven months at a time among them, on the river Uaupés, but even there I failed to catch a payé (1908: II: 431).

Despite this failure, he still felt able to provide a detailed account of the activities of the payés in the area, including a lengthy description of a cure. Wallace similarly provided a thorough but unwitnessed description. Reichel-Dolmatoff's accounts, once again including detailed descriptions of cures, are based on only limited visits to the field. In particular, Amazonian Cosmos (1971) derives almost exclusively from evidence provided in Bogotá by a single, 'acculturated' pesana informant. Goldman saw only one 'full' cure. He also admits that he could never clarify the relationship between the yavi and the jaguar because no yavi was willing to talk about it.

Despite these problems the traditional image has continued to frame people's expectations and influence their research. Jackson arrived with the intention of studying 'the beliefs and practices related to disease and curing' (1972: 1) and of working with 'the disease specialists of the area' (ibid: 2), but eventually changed her project. Langdon had a similar aim:

When I began my fieldwork I wanted to do a thorough study of an indigenous medical system, concentrating on curing rituals as a form of psychotherapy. I had hoped to follow illness cases and analyse the therapeutic process in terms of the shaman's use of symbols and his manipulation of social relations (1975: 1).

He found the situation more fluid than he had imagined and had difficulty in extracting the required information from the respected curers. In

particular, he discovered that dramatic curing rituals were an exceptional rather than a typical part of the shaman's activities. Most curing took the form of the private and inconspicuous blessing of foodstuffs in order to make them safe to eat, a skill which was accessible to all adult men and practised by many of them to a greater or lesser degree.

There is thus very little eye-witness evidence of dramatic cures and certainly no basis for considering them a typical marker of the separate status of the shaman. There is even less direct evidence of apprenticeships. Although a number of fieldworkers have witnessed male and female initiation ceremonies, none have seen novices undergoing a specific training in shamanism. Goldman admits that 'none of my laymen informants could describe it in full' (1963: 264) while no-one else would (or could).

Frequently, writers have sought, as Spruce did, to explain these absences in terms of either the influence of 'whites' or the necessary secrecy surrounding shamanic activity. The lack of the anticipated numbers and type of shamans has been used commonly as an index of cultural collapse in the face of 'white' repression. Without denying that there may well have been instances in which 'whites' persecuted those they had labelled as shamans, it may well be that these arguments about secrecy and decline are elaborations attempting to make good a false set of presuppositions. The silence of certain informants may derive from the fact that the questions they were asked did not make sense to them.

III

If, in the Tukanoan case, there are grounds to doubt the accuracy of a picture of readily separable specialists and, more generally, to question the merits of an approach which begins from this point of view, it remains to offer some suggestions as to why this perspective has been so pervasive in the literature on the Tukanoans and on shamanism as a whole.

In the Vaupés a great deal of the evidence has come from what people have said rather than from what they have been observed to do. It thus becomes particularly important to examine the assumptions that underlie the way in which language is used by 'white' informants, by anthropologists, and by the Indians themselves. Many of the early writers were uncritical in this respect. They relied heavily on what local traders told them and on what earlier travellers had written, seeming to accept the existence of a stereotypical mystical specialist throughout the Amazon without considering the specificity of earlier accounts or the extent to which they were part of a tradition informing later sources. Spruce, for example, felt that the similarities between local accounts of payés and seventeenth and eighteenth century descriptions of shamanism in the Caribbean and Guayana were so great as to allow him merely to quote the latter rather than elaborate on the former (1908: II: 432-4).

This assumption of a stereotypical specialist was encouraged by the widespread use of the term 'payé'. It is derived from words found in both Tupi and Carib languages and, in its Tupi form, became absorbed into *nehenghatu* or *lingua Geral*, a pidginized version of Tupi developed

by the early jesuit missionaries in Brazil and used by traders and explorers throughout the Amazon as a means of communication with Indians. The term encompassed the idea of a medicine-man, a medico-religious specialist capable of contacting spirits in a trance in order to influence events. Its range of reference was thus very similar to that of 'shaman' and the two are now treated as synonymous. Reichel-polmatoff, for example, uses the terms interchangeably. Furthermore, he treats indigenous terms such as *ye'e* as merely local versions of the ubiquitous form 'payé', referring for example to 'the native word for payé ...' (1975: 101). The Tukanoans are not members of the Tupi language group, however, and 'payé' is not an indigenous term. Although it gained some currency at the turn of the century with the influx of rubber dealers it is rarely if ever used in conversation between Indians (Sorensen 1967: 680). A number of *lingua geral* terms are used in conversation with 'whites', but it may be that, where matters of religious significance arise, these terms are used merely to obfuscate in the face of intrusive 'white' interest. Such is apparently the case with the word 'Jurupari', which is widely used in the early literature to refer to the devil, devilry and, by association, much Indian religious activity (Goldman 1963: 192; S. Hughes-jones 1974: 6-7). The same may be true of 'payé', a term used to demarcate the specialist often said to deal with 'Jurupari'.

Thus, it is not clear that a great deal of authority can be vested in the early accounts or that the situation they describe can be taken as a basis for a measure of subsequent change. More recent accounts of the Vaupés, and more general works on shamanism continue to approach the problem in a similar way, however. There seem to be a number of reasons for this beyond their mutually reinforcing effects.

First, there is a particular view of language which treats it as a nomenclature and assumes that the meaning of a term, particularly one referring to people, is an ostensibly specifiable class of phenomena. This has little credibility as a general theory of meaning but seems to be encouraged in anthropology by the methodological necessity in field-work of giving priority to the collection of ostensive definitions.

Secondly, and more specifically, the assumption of an intrinsic identity between a person and his occupation is common in our own society and appears to be extended to others. Normally, we introduce people according to their occupation, particularly if they are 'members of the professions', and, concomitantly, we make a number of assumptions about the nature of the person's skills and qualifications. For example, if we say 'he is a doctor', we assume that the person so described has undergone a period of training and that, if necessary, he could show us the insignia of his position - a doctor's bag, a stethoscope, or, more securely, a set of certificates. It is the successful training that entitles the man (or woman) to act as a doctor in the eyes of every member of a given society. We assume, further, that given this clearly separated status, we could count the number of doctors. It seems that, in the study of religious specialists, indigenous terms have often been treated as being used in a way analogous to our own use of terms such as 'doctor' and that this usage creates an idiom which significantly influences our articulation of indigenous systems. This is not to suggest that there is an absolute difference between the way we talk about people and the way that the Tukanoans, for example, do. A term

such as 'singer' seems, in all but the relational sense, to approximate more closely to the word kumú, covering certain animals as well as people, describing actions, states, ceremonial roles or widely recognised abilities, and applying in one instance to almost everyone and in another to only a few. Nonetheless, the image of the doctor seems widespread in the study of medico-religious specialisation. References to shamans as 'part-time' specialists merely confirm the primacy of the model of professional occupation. This model carries with it expectations about status and qualification. In the Tukanoan case at least, it seems possible that it has generated descriptions of a distinct apprenticeship that does not really exist in this way.

A third factor concerns the relationship between the status of the subject and concomitant images of the social. It is common now, in the Vaupés and elsewhere, to conduct fieldwork by intensive study in a single settlement over a period of time which is necessarily short in relation to significant changes for that settlement. From such a point of view, particularly in societies that lack any formal institutions, things may seem more fixed than they are in reality. The position of the naming subject is something that should not merely be taken for granted and generalised to characterise a society as a whole.

IV

The primary aim of this paper has been to question the merits of a particular way of approaching medico-religious practices both in general terms and by reference to a specific ethnographic context. Although the paper has concentrated largely on the latter, there may be grounds for re-examining the study of mystical specialists throughout lowland South America and perhaps more widely. Significantly, Alan Campbell has come to conclusions concerning the Tupi-speaking Oyampi similar to those suggested here concerning the Tukanoans. He argues that the indigenous term i p. ye is much better seen as an adjective, indicating a quality, than as a substantive indicating a role or office. He does not refer to the relational uses of such a term, but argues nonetheless for a change of perspective in which the office is approached as something constituted by the quality in the way that the office of village strong-man is constituted by the quality of strength (personal communication).

This paper suggests that there are grounds for a closer attention to the position of the subject. This applies not only to the specific instance of Tukanoan shamanism, but also more generally. The Durkheimian exorcism of the individual has meant that the status of human agency has been problematic for both functionalist and structuralist analyses. Concomitantly, insufficient attention has been paid to the capacity of social actors to produce meaning in the use of language. The position of the subject should not be taken for granted but should be explained and, in turn, become explanatory (cf. e.g. Coward and Ellis 1977).

In a related way it may be beneficial to look at the relational aspects of terminologies in areas other than 'kinship'. Nick Allen, in an as yet unpublished paper on the logically simplest forms of social structure (Allen n.d.), argues that purely relational systems are logically prior to ones involving absolute designations and that

functional specialisations associated with these systems should be seen in the same light. certainly, in the Vaupés, there seems to be some advantage in proceeding from the assumption of relative designation.

Allen also suggests, as a hypothesis, that relational systems are chronologically prior. He does not consider in any detail the conditions of a move towards an absolute system, but it is possible that one of these might be the creation of a referential identity between a group and a particular territory as happens when nomadic hunters and gatherers gradually settle and come into conflict with others over land. A more precipitate basis might be the influence of 'white' or 'European' contact. The 'creation' of tribes and chiefs is a familiar motif both in the evolution of agricultural communities and in histories of colonialism and cultural imperialism. In the Vaupés these trends are readily identifiable. They are both prefaced and reflected by the way in which the Indians are described. It may well be that as a part of this process the 'whites' created the shaman, at least in the form of a separable specialist. The traditional shaman may exist only in the fragments of language and spruce may have failed to catch a payé because he was hunting a mythical beast.

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NOTE

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