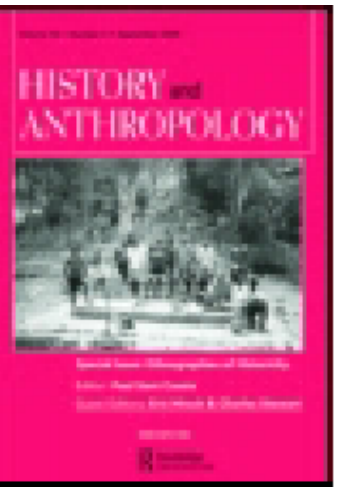

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Could sangama read? The origin of writing among the Piro of Eastern Peru

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Could Sangama Read?

The origin of writing among the Piro of Eastern Peru

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I never went to school. I learned with drugs alone. Everything I know comes from Datura. (Old shaman, Bajo Urubamba)

This paper is intended as a contribution to two neglected areas: the ethnography of literacy and graphic systems in Amazonia, and to the historiography of Native Amazonian peoples. It analyses a text collected by a Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) missionary in the mid-1950's from one of the first Piro bilingual school teachers. The text is the story of Sangama, who claimed the knowledge of reading in the early decades of this century, when the Piro were living in debt-slavery to white people. Following from an analysis of the historical relationship between the Piro and Western alphabetic script, I show how the indigenous graphic design systems affected the interpretation of European writing. I go on to argue that Sangama's account of writing reflects the relationship between graphic design and language in Piro shamanic practice.

Despite the present importance of educational institutions and literacy for many Native Amazonian peoples, particularly through the work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators and their programmes of bilingual education, anthropologists have seldom addressed the issue of literacy in these cultures. On the whole, literacy has been treated as simply another feature of contact between tribal Amazonian people and national societies. It has been claimed by certain writers (Goody (1977), Ong (1982)) that literacy has the potential to radically transform a culture, but anthropologists have produced little information on how those Native Amazonian peoples with extensive literatures in their own language (such as the Shuar, Aguaruna and Napo Quichua) have reacted to this change. Equally, with a few notable exceptions such as Gebhart-Sayer (1985) and Casevitz (1980/1981), anthropologists have paid scant attention to what Native Amazonian people think of Western alphabetic writing, despite its

importance in the practice of missionaries and government officials, and indeed of anthropologists themselves. It is as if the ethnographers of Native Amazonian cultures agree with Lévi-Strauss (1955) that writing is a great evil from which these peoples have been preserved, and simultaneously contend that literacy is a great blessing for them once they are in continuous contact with national society.

In this paper I want to address one aspect of this issue. The Piro of Bajo Urubamba in Eastern Peru, among whom I conducted fieldwork between 1980 and 1982, are notable for their high literacy rates, and the provision of school education is central to the organization of their communities[1]. This can be traced to their response to the educational programmes of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which began work among the Piro in the 1940's. Matteson, the SIL missionary among the Piro, reported the situation in the early 1950's as follows,

> The ability of some to read Spanish ... indicates an intense desire for learning and progress, since the advance was made in Spanish-speaking schools where the Piro appeared stupid, and were ridiculed and scolded. They persisted until many of them could sound out the words quite fluently, but in a majority of cases without very full understanding of the content ... In 1947 under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a Piro orthography was prepared and primers and booklets were presented to the people. They were received enthusiastically. Well over a hundred and fifty have undertaken to learn to read, and of them about forty read well at present. (1954: 65)

The sheer enthusiasm of this response raises a serious historical question. For those of who can read and write in an alphabetic script, the advantages of such knowledge seem self-evident, but there is no reason to impute such an attitude to those who cannot. What was the source of such enthusiasm, given that the Piro, like any other Native Amazonian people, most certainly did not share European theories of knowledge, language and writing, and that the attempts of some to learn to read had both been humiliating and fruitless. If the high literacy rates of the Piro can be traced in part of the SIL's brand of structural linguistics and to their pedagogic techniques, the other side of the explanation must lie in the desire of non-literate Piro to learn to read and write. What, in short *pre-adapted* the Piro to take up the opportunity afforded by the SIL?

This question refers to a historical situation homologous to Lévi-Strauss' "Writing Lesson" among the Nambikwara (1955), but with a crucial difference. In the case analysed here, we can observe the results of such a situation, but not the events themselves. The situation is a common one for ethnographers of Amazonia. We can assert, as an article of faith, that Native Amazonian cultures are historical projects (cf. Viveiros de Castro (1986)), but

we have little evidence of their historical projections. Even when they narrate the past, Native Amazonian people seem to be directly engaged with the present, responding to the specific relationship between narrator and listener. When I talked to Piro people about writing, they made me constantly aware that I was a literate person. They did not question the value of literacy, nor did they fail to stress the signal advantages of my position. In such a situation we need a bridge between literacy and non-literacy, something outside of the contemporary dialogue between the Piro and the ethnographer. Luckily we have such a bridge to the margins of literacy: the story of Sangama, the "first Piro who could read".

The "Story of Sangama" is a text recorded in Piro by the SIL missionary Esther Matteson in the late 1940's from Moran Zumaeta, a Piro headman and bilingual schoolteacher of the community of Bufeo Pozo on the Bajo Urubamba river[2]. It is the text of Zumaeta's account of Sangama, who was the first Piro man to have "made a start" at reading. Zumaeta gives an account of his older cousin Sangama, of his reading of white people's literature, and of his attempts to teach Zumaeta to read. Information provided by Matteson and clues internal to the text suggest that the period referred to is in the second decade of this century[3]. Several preliminary points should be made about the historical context of this narrative, and about its particular style.

Zumaeta's story of Sangama, for all that it appears in print in Matteson's monograph on the Piro language (1965), is in essence a Piro oral narrative. As such, it obeys the narrative conventions of Piro discourse. Because it recounts the personal experience of the narrator, there is no use of the quotatives which are obligatory in secondhand narration, nor is the authority of the text marked by reference to a prior narrator[4]. But it has certain distinguishing features of such discourse, such as appeals to kinship relations as a source of knowledge and the constant questioning of whether Sangama could actually read. I will return to these later, when I suggest that the narration has some important implications for the relationship between the Piro and the SIL.

As I have stated, the text was recorded by the SIL missionary Matteson. Matteson's work among the Piro, begun in 1947, was one of the earlierst SIL projects in Peru, and the Piro of the Bajo Urubamba were among the first native peoples to be provided with a bilingual education programme. As indicated by the quote from Matteson given above, the Piro had been in contact with school education before this date, but with little success: the Seventh Day Adventists had provided Spanish-only education since 1937, in Unini and Huau, and Dominican missionaries provided similar education in Sepahua from 1948. But it was the SIL who had the most profound impact on the Piro, and their influence, at least with respect to literacy, has been enduring. Of the Piro people I knew in 1981, everyone under forty years old

was fully literate, often in both Spanish and Piro. Literacy was highly valued by them and schools were an essential feature of every "real" village. Further, Piro people, literate or not, refer to the period when the SIL arrived on the Bajo Urubamba as the time "when we liberated ourselves from slavery", and point to the educational opportunities offered by the SIL as their primary reason for joining communities with SIL attachment. It must be noted that the importance that Piro people attach to the SIL is historically specific to this period: most contemporary people have many criticisms of the SIL and of bilingual education, and have no desire to return to the situation of the 1940's and 1950's.

The SIL started their work among the Piro at a time when the Bajo Urubamba, and Peruvian Amazonia in general, was in a period of rapid socio-economic change. The Second World War had supplied the impetus for a rapid transformation of the region from an economic backwater into a source of strategic resources on the world market. In particular, the completion of the Lima-Pucallpa highway in 1943 allowed tropical hardwoods to be exported directly from the Bajo Urubamba region to world markets. The native people of the region shifted quickly from relations of debt-slavery on the *haciendas* of their white bosses into seasonal lumbering combined with autonomous subsistence production. Native people were not freed from debt, which continues to structure commercial relations in lumbering, but they did free themselves from the slavery of continuous residence with their bosses. They set up independent villages, which were increasingly focussed on the bilingual schools established by the SIL.

If literacy and education have come to stand for the freedom from debt-slavery for the Piro, then illiteracy and ignorance are the markers of their condition on the *haciendas*. From the 1880's, when rubber bosses first engaged the Piro in direct commercial relations, until the early 1940's, when the local economy was transformed, the native people of the Bajo Urubamba had been living in conditions of both debt-slavery and continuous co-residence with their white bosses. In the second decade of this century, the rubber industry collapsed and was replaced by a system of *hacienda* commercial agriculture, but the relations between native people and their bosses remained remarkably constant. This was the world of Sangama, and Zumaeta's narrative makes constant reference to the poverty, ignorance and dependency of the Piro in relation to their bosses at this time. The *hacienda* was a rigorously hierarchical institution, with the white boss in complete control over the economic lives of his slaves. The power of these bosses rested on their exclusive control over the imported goods on which native people's culture had come to depend. Only these white bosses were capable of calling the river boats up from Iquitos, laden with cargoes of goods. Many of the white people on the Bajo Urubamba today have a certain nostalgia for this period of absolute control over their native workers. As the ex-mayor

of the local municipality stated, with reference to the government money spent on schools in native communities,

> Why waste money educating these Indians? Were they not born to be our slaves?

Zumaeta's account of Sangama is thus the account of a Piro man who possessed the knowledge of literacy in a period when the Piro as a people were living in a condition of debt-slavery predicated on their exclusion from the knowledge which controlled the commercial relations of the economy. It is also, as Zumaeta constantly stresses, the story told by a man who "liberated himself from slavery" through being taught to read and write by the SIL about an older kinsman who claimed such knowledge without the benefit of such teaching. This is central to the story: Zumaeta is literate because of the arrival of the SIL, whereas Sangama was apparently literate without such manifest teaching. The source of Sangama's knowledge was occult, for it was not knowledge generally available to the Piro people at this period.

In Zumaeta's account, Sungama would pick up the newspapers and bound books thrown away by the bosses, and read from them. Zumaeta describes how Sangama would open a book, then read, his eyes following the letters and his mouth moving (Lines 9-11). People would bring Sangama the newspapers thrown out by their boss, and ask him what the paper said (24-37). Sangama would read it then, the following being an example of his reading,

> Then he said, "Ehhh. My Europe. My Pará. My Manaos. Ah! yes," he said. "Yes. I am here. All is well. Your grandmother is here. She is well. I am living here permanently now. Ah! So that's how it is! That's what happened. The big river. Ah! A steamboat is coming. Ah! Merchandise is coming" (47-67)

Sangama explained that the message had been written by his children,

> "They are the ones who wrote it", he explained. "A daughter of mine, who lives on the river bank in Manaos wrote it. She says that when the steamer crosses the water, such goods as have never been spoken of here will come. The steamer will bring goods. She tells me the goods will come here." (78-83)

Zumaeta goes on to relate how Sangama read out other messages about aeroplanes bringing goods for the people on the Bajo Urubamba, but which were being prevented from arriving by people shooting at them *en route*. When the plane arrives, he said, the Piro will be rich in goods and cease to live in wretched slavery to the whites. He described the aeroplane in some detail, and also the cities of "Manaos" and "Pará", with their teeming

multitudes of white people and their metal-roofed houses, and the place called Europe, with its "big city of miracles".

Zumaeta's account of the actual practice of Sangama's reading is orthodox enough from a Western perspective: we instantly recognize the eye and lip movements from our own practice. It is harder to believe that the newspapers being read by the white bosses on the Bajo Urubamba were written by Sangama's daughter, or that their function was to send the Piro messages about their coming liberation from slavery. The continuous refrain in Sangama's reading of "My Manaos, my Pará, my Europe" is a succinct summary of the economic geography of the Amazonian rubber industry, when the rubber produced on the Bajo Urubamba flowed downriver through the cities of Manaos and Belem do Pará on the Brazilian Amazon and then on to Europe, to cancel the debts incurred by the massive importation of consumer goods from that place of "miraculous power". Very little of this mass of imports reached the Piro during the period of rubber production, and still less when it ended. Perhaps we can see here the elements of a classic "cargo cult": Sangama, unique in his ability to read the white people's papers, was able to relay the messages being sent by the true producers of this wealth, the children of Piro people themselves[5]. It is further possible that Sangama's account of the aeroplane being shot at is a shadowy account of the First World War, which immediately succeeded the collapse of rubber prices.

Zumaeta stresses that much of the information provided by Sangama was both accurate and prophetic, including his description of aeroplanes, which no-one on the Bajo Urubamba had seen at that time. We might then suspect that Sangama could indeed read, and that his only mistake was naively thinking that the newspapers were talking directly to him and to his kinspeople. However, such a simple solution is controverted by Sangama's own account of how he read. He explained reading to Zumaeta as follows,

> "You folks listen to me, but others belittle me. They say, 'Sangama the ignorant, the liar. He does his lying by reading dirty paper from the outhouse'. They laugh at me, and distort my words all the time. Why should my eyes be like theirs? My eyes are not like theirs. I know how to read the paper. It speaks to me. Look at this one now." He turned its leaves. "See. She speaks to me. The paper has a body; I always see her, cousin," he said to me. "I always see this paper. She has red lips with which she speaks. She has a body with a red mouth, a painted mouth. She has a red mouth." (275-294)

Zumaeta reports that he stared at the paper, but saw no woman there. Sangama insisted and said that the paper was asking if Zumaeta wanted to know her (307-313). Zumaeta asks if this is true, and Sangama replies,

> "Yes. Paper does that. That's why the white converses with her every day. Haven't you seen him? Watch him do that. When the white, our patron, sees

> a paper, he holds it up all day long, and she talks to him. She converses with him all day long. The white does that every day. Therefore I also, just a little bit, when I went downriver a long time ago to Pará - I used to go there all the time - I was taught there. I entered a what-do-you-call-it - school. I was enrolled. A teacher sent for me. That's how I know, cousin".[6] (316-328)

Sangama's claim that he was taught in a school in Pará would seem to solve the mystery of how he could read, even if it is a little improbable that anyone in nineteenth century Belem would have wasted their time teaching a Peruvian Indian to read. But if Sangama had been taught to read in a school, why does he describe the paper as having a body, and a mouth with red lips? Western folk theories of alphabetic script may insist that this writing actually represents speech, but they never go as far as to give the text a mouth and a body. So what is Sangama talking about?

One of the most remarkable features of Sangama's account of reading, at least for a Western person, is that he does not treat the graphic components of writing as "representations" or "symbols" of words. Indeed, Zumaeta's account makes virtually no mention of the writing at all. In Western folk theory, writing (especially the alphabet) is a visual representation of language, and words are visual representations of speech. Sangama's account is bizarre precisely because he experiences the text directly as a person who speaks, as "a woman with a painted mouth". There are, I would argue, two important reasons why this should be so. The first relates to a general feature of Piro culture, the importance of graphic designs in Piro art and visual experience. The second is that Sangama interpreted literacy through a consistent set of metaphors drawn from shamanic practice, an interpretation apparently unique to him.

In Piro, writing is called *yona*. *Yona* also refers to those particular painted, woven or engraved designs which are central to Piro art[7]. The assimilation of European writing to an indigenous term for design is not unique to the Piro. The same equation is made in the Panoan languages spoken by the Shipibo and Conibo to the north along the Ucayali river, for whom *quene* means both "design" and "writing" (Gebhart-Sayer (1985)), and in many other parts of Amazonia. In Piro and Shipibo-Conibo cultures, the complex *yona/quene* designs are extremely important, and serve to mark them off from their neighbours as an indication of their "beautiful culture". Archaeological research demonstrates that these design systems are ancient, and suggests that design has long been important to the Ucayali peoples (Lathrap, Gebhart-Sayer and Mester (1985)).

Despite considerable effort to discover semantic or representational dimensions for the elaborate graphic art of the Piro and the cognate styles of the Shipibo and Conibo to the north, such studies have met with little success[8]. Particular designs are named, but there is little evidence that the

designs "mean" the name given to them, or that the names are anything other than descriptive. My own understanding of this issue is that this graphic art is not concerned with the way particular designs carry either representational or semantic content, but with the visual control of surfaces. Piro women with whom I discussed these designs had little to say about particular classes of design, but were much more forthcoming about the manner in which a particular design was adapted in execution to the surface. The rigorous logic of a particular design class is maintained over the entire surface, no matter how complex its shape. Successful adaptation of a design to a complex surface is the source of its beauty, while failure to integrate the design is condemned as "ugly".

The aesthetic power of such designs rests on the principles of Lévi-Strauss identified in Caduveo art from southern Brazil, in his analysis of "split representation",

> ... the plastic and graphic components ... have an ambivalent relationship, which is simultaneously one of opposition and one that is functional. It is a relationship of opposition because the requirements of decoration are imposed upon the structure and change it, hence the splitting and dislocation; but it is also a functional relationship, since the object is always conceived in both its plastic and graphic components. (1963: 260)

Lévi-Strauss here captures the powerful visual effects of Ucayali art: the constant tension between the painted design and the surface to which it is applied, be it a pot, an article of clothing, or a human body.

The importance of graphic designs in Piro and other Ucayali cultures does not rest on the way the designs convey a semantic or representational content for which the surface is a mere substrate. Designs are not applied at random to any surface but only the surfaces of certain things closely associated with people and which have been recently produced: pottery used for serving food or beer, clothing, paddles, bracelets, and the human skin. By being covered with design, such things are made beautiful through the skills of women with the knowledge of "real design", and thus defined as "real Piro" things (see illus.). "Design" and its production is specialist female knowledge, and is the means of female control over the physical transformations of material forms. This is the opposite of shamanic practice, which is largely but not exclusively a masculine realm. Shamanic practice deals precisely with transformations in material form and in the rupture of surfaces. Such transformations are controlled through the oral language of the curing song, as I discuss below[9].

If this is what *yona* means to the Piro, it remains to investigate the extension of the term to Western writing. The Piro and their northern Panoan neighbours were in contact with Spanish missionaries, and by implication with European writing, from at least the middle of the seventeenth century.

Illustration: Piro bag with painted *yona* designs (Maria, Bajo Urubamba)

(Photograph by Michael Brandon-Jones)

Missionaries were actively residing with Piro groups for limited periods from 1799 onwards. While these missionaries probably made no attempt to teach literacy to the Piro or Shipibo-Conibo, these native people must have had considerable experience of the importance of literature to Europeans.

In this context it is interesting to note that while the Piro extended an existing word for "design" to cover European writing, they borrowed the word for written texts themselves. In Piro, all written texts are called *kiruka*. This word derives ultimately from a dialect of Quechua, most probably the Quechua of San Martin, the *lingua franca* of the nineteenth century Franciscan missions. In this dialect *killka* means "letter" and *killkay* "to write" (Park, Weber and Cenepo S. (1976)). As it was borrowed into Piro, this term lost its connotation of "writing" (which was assimilated to *yona*), and was focussed in on the material of the text itself. *Kiruka* also means "paper in general"[10]. Gebhart-Sayer (1985) has demonstrated that the Shipibo-Conobo were fascinated with the books of the missionaries in the nineteenth century, and resented the priests for refusing to give them books. The Shipibo-Conibo seem to have even produced their own books, each page covered in complex designs. Certain contemporary Shipibo-Conibo shamans use invisible books of "design medicine", and significantly Gebhart-Sayer notes of these,

> There are some indications that a shaman may read the designs of his vision analytically in linear pursuit of individual configuration, but in general the design visions are described as overall, nonanalytical impressions of entire patterned "pages" or "sheets" flashed rapidly in front of the shaman's inner eye and vanishing as he tries to have a closer look (1985: 161).

I will return to the visual experience of the shamans below.

My argument is that the Piro historically assimilated the graphic component of European writing to their own category of "design". As such it held no particular interest for them: no more interest, that is to say, than the particularities of the graphic designs of such neighbouring peoples with "ugly designs", like the Campa, Machiguenga and Amahuaca, hold for them now. The lack of semantic import in the indigenous design systems would have predisposed them to ignore the characters as potential bearers of meaning. But equally, because Ucayali graphic art emphasizes the status of the design-bearing surface of a material form, the Piro and Shipibo-Conibo would have been predisposed to locate the power of European writing in the material form that it covered: the *kiruka*, the book or paper itself. Thus, while Westerners have searched the graphic component of Ucayali art in the vain pursuit of a semantic key, the Ucayali people chose the other pole of the relationship which Lévi-Strauss describes, and searched the plastic component of European writing for an explanation of its power for the white intruders.

This helps to explain Sangama's lack of emphasis on writing as such, and his constant stress on the paper. Like many other native people of the Ucayali before him, Sangama recognized the importance of writing to the white people who oppressed and exploited him and his kinspeople, but he did not locate the source of that power in the graphic component of European writing. He saw the paper itself, the *kiruka*, as the source of that power. But why did he say that paper had a red painted mouth and a body? Why did he appeal to such a powerfully *corporeal* imagery, especially if, as Zumaeta's account suggests he could actually read? The source of Sangama's account of reading lies, I would argue, in the shamanic use of the hallucinogen *ayahuasca*.

Ayahuasca (Piro: *kamalampi, natga* or *totsga*) is the primary shamanic curing drug on the Bajo Urubamba at present, and the evidence suggests this has long been the case. This drug, *Banisteriopsis* spp., is taken by shamans in order to reveal information hidden to normal vision, such as the source of illness and the presence of sorcery objects (*virote*) in a patient's body. The vine *ayahuasca* is said to be the body of a spirit, *ayahuascamama*, "*Ayahuasca* Mother". When an infusion of the vine is taken during a curing session, this spirit first manifests herself in the terrifying form of a giant anaconda winding itself around the drinker's stomach and forcing its tail into his or her mouth. This is a phase of intense visual experience, accompanied by violent naussea: designs in bright colours and serpentine form cover the entire visual field. These snake designs are the arrival of *ayahuascamama* in her fearful manifestation. Then the shaman begins to sing his *ícaros*, "curing songs", which tame *ayahuascamama* into revealing herself in her true form: that of a beautiful woman. Thus tamed, this spirit begins to aid in the cure, revealing the source of the illness and singing her own potent curing songs. *Ayahuascamama* herself, it is said, is the source of curing knowledge in the form of such songs: if one cleans one's body through observing prohibitions and if one drinks *ayahuasca* often, she will teach the *ícaros*, the manifestation of curing power.

The power of *ayahuasca* lies in its ability to transform the shamans' vision such that they see the spirit sources of illness and curing as people. These spirits are either invisible or they have a non-human physical appearance (as trees or other natural phenomena). Revealed in their physical form as people, the shamans treat them socially, appealing to them to aid with the cure. This is done through the *ícaro*, curing song. The words of the curing song are compulsive to the spirits, invoking their aid, just as respectful speech enlists the aid and love of kinspeople[11]. But unlike the speech between kin, the curing songs are incomprehensible to non-shamans. These songs are either in languages not spoken on the Bajo Urubamba, such as Quechua, or in archaic forms of Piro and Campa. All my informants stressed the incomprehensibility of these curing songs, even when they simultaneously gave

me plausible interpretations of their content[12]. The true meaning of curing songs, one might say, lie not in this normal world but in the visual experience of shamans as they see the world through the eyes of *ayahuasca*.

"Why should my eyes be like theirs?", Sangama says (281). Sangama's account of reading is a sustained analogy on the shamanic use of *ayahuasca*. Paper has another visual identity than just paper: it is a woman with a painted red mouth[13]. Sangama insistently repeats that the paper has a body: in Piro, "*kamanro*", "she is-characterized by/possesses a body/corporeal form". This reflects the progression in *ayahuasca* curing from the fear manifestations of the spirit to her revelation as a beautiful woman. Through the use of this drug, the spirits reveal themselves as people, in the corporeal forms of people, rather than the vague symptoms of illness in the patient's body. In *ayahuasca* curing, the appearance of *yona*, "design", in the form of terrifying anacondas, is succeeded by the appearance of the spirits in their true forms. Similarly, for Sangama, reading is a transformation of paper, from a surface covered with "design", into a corporeal woman who speaks to him, and reveals information about distant realms and about the activities and intentions of their inhabitants. Where for the contemporary shaman, these are the denizens of the river and of the forest, for Sangama, they were his children in Manaos, Belem and Europe.

Whatever else it involves, the use of *ayahuasca* is a technique of visual transformation. *Ayahuasca* is always taken at night, and as the drug takes effect, the darkness fills up with dense patterns of coloured light, which wind and shift until they are replaced with images of people, plants, animals and places. These visual transformations are matched to auditory ones, as the normal sounds of the night are replaced with the rushing and buzzing of the drunkeness of *ayahuasca*, which in turn give way to the potent words and melodies of the *ícaros*. The visual experience of the stream of images is the essential counterpart to the curing songs. When I asked shamans about the meanings of these songs, they invariably replied,

> "Drink *ayahuasca*. Taking the drug, you will learn and understand!"

It seems highly probable to me that the *denotata* of the curing songs lie in this torrent of imagery, just as the words of everyday language denote the everday world. If this is so, then shamantic practice provides an excellent set of metaphors through which to think about writing, where the spoken message of the hidden speaker exists, for the ignorant, only in visual form.

More research is needed to confirm this hypothesis, but it is at least clear that Sangama agrees with Western conceptions of alphabetic script in treating writing as the material manifestation of a voice. But he parts company with the Western conceptions when it comes to the status of this voice. For Western people, writing encodes speech, and anyone familiar with the code

can read the message, even if they do not understand what the message means. For Sangama, the paper is the manifestation of a woman who bears messages. Those who know how to read, like Sangama and the white bosses, have the "eyes" which allow them to see the printed page as this woman, and talk to her. As with shamanic practice, this contact with a language known only to the few involves a radical transformation in visual identity. As shamans take *ayahuasca*, they see the invisible *ayahuascamama* reveal herself as a beautiful woman, and understand her curing songs. The same with Sangama: to one who knows, the printed page transforms into a woman, and one who can understand the otherwise inaudible messages being sent from far away.

The sender of Sangama's messages also have a precise analogue in shamanic practice. Bajo Urubamba shamans have magical stones called *incantos*, which they address as their "children". When the shaman takes *ayahuasca*, these stones reveal themselves as people, and they both protect the shaman from enemies and aid in the curing. Thus for both Sangama and the contemporary shamans, "children" play a crucial mediating role in contacts with beings of other worlds. In fact, it is not impossible that Sangama had children in Manaos and Europe as he claimed: many young native children were taken away by white people during those times to be sold as domestic slaves in the cities of Amazonia and beyond[14]. What is unlikely is that any of these children became wealthy when they grew up, and it is still less likely that they became literate.

The most explicit confirmation of Sangama's shamanic analogy comes with his attempt to teach Zumeata to read. He describes this as follows,

> "If you want it, you can receive the paper," he said. Then he said, "Come here. I'm going to teach you." I went to his side. "Come on, cousin," he said then. "Prepare the crown of your head." He blew into his cupped hand and the transferred the breath to the crown of my head, clearing his throat, "Haxxxx. Haxx." Again he endowed the crown of my head with his breath, and then my back. He gave it to me all over my back. "Hxxx. See that. It will enable you to read", he said to me solemnly. I thought he would teach me to read by means of my eyes, but he drew out his breath and endowed me with it, transferring it to the crown of my head, to my throat and back. He whirled me around as he blew, "Haxx hahaxx." He inserted it into my back. "Haxx haxx." ... "From now on you too observe taboos. Don't drink manioc beer all the time," he ordered me severely. (427-449, 457-458)

Sangama transfers the knowledge of reading to Zumaeta by means of his breath. He does not simply "blow" on his hands: he blows in a specifically shamanic manner. The "throat-clearing" refers to what is currently called *yachay* on the Bajo Urubamba: this is the magical phlegm of shamans, which is lodged in the stomach, but which they raise in their throats in order to

blow shamanically. This phlegm is described as luminescent, and is the locus of a shaman's power and knowledge. The sound, "haxxxx haxx", which appears in the text, is specific to this type of blowing, as the shaman's breath is forced out over the *yachay*, causing it to rattle and to acquire the knowledge of the shaman, and transfers part of that potent knowledge to the one blown upon.

We can now see that Sangama's account of reading is based on a sustained analogy to shamanic knowledge. In this sense it becomes almost irrelevant whether or not Sangama could actually read. The shamanic analogy would be equally appropriate for explaining his powers to his fellow Piro whether he could actually decode the writing in newspapers or not. His understanding of the writings of white people, unique to him among all Piro, could only be understood within the paradigms of shamanic knowledge. As Zumaeta says, "How on earth did he know? No-one ever saw him being taught." (555). Thus Zumaeta dismisses what is for us the most obvious explanation of Sangama's literacy: that he had, as he claimed, been to school. But this explanation is a totally occult one for the Piro, for nobody else saw him being taught. For the Piro, only shamanic knowledge has this quality of occult origin, and any such occult knowledge necessarily partakes of the shamanic.

Sangama's analysis of writing and reading, then, borrowed the paradigm of shamanic knowledge in order to explain the mechanics of this alien but potent medium of communication. This raises the question of the effects of the SIL literacy programmes and evangelization on shamanic practices on the Bajo Urubamba. How did Sangama's analysis, and by extension shamanic knowledge in general, fare in the face of the overt extension of literacy to the Piro from the late 1940's onwards? In the 1980's most Piro are Christians, either Baptist or Catholic and of various degrees of devotion. But they are almost unanimous in their faith in shamanic curing, especially the use of *ayahuasca*. Just as every village must have a school, most villages have one or more practicing shamans. Literacy and shamanism are two equally important forms of knowledge which control the hostile exterior world: where literacy allows native people to deal with their white bosses and the State, shamans deal with the sources of illness in the river and the forest.

Sangama's understanding of writing seems to have disappeared without trace from contemporary Piro culture: no-one described writing to me in such shamantic terms[15]. But the shamanic paradigm that underlies Sangama's account has survived the SIL literacy programmes. Indeed this seems to be one of the motivations behind Zumaeta's narrative. Talking as he was to the SIL missionary Matteson, Zumaeta constantly questions whether or not Sangama could read. How could he read, given that he never had the benefit of the overt instruction provided by the SIL, of which all Piro people were by then aware? Zumaeta, one of the first literate Piro and one of the

first bilingual schoolteachers, returns again and again to this problem. His solution is as follows,

> Maybe he was just lying; maybe not. What was the score? But it is said that he was a twin. Maybe that is why he thought up such things, and the things he told originated in his own mind. Now I have told you about him. We know him as having been said to be the first to know how to read. That is all I will tell. (556-563)

For the Piro, people born with a twin have a special quality: they are born shamans. Unlike everyone else, they require no training[16]. Thus, Zumaeta implies, Sangama could read because he was born a shaman, and his extraordinary knowledge of reading originated within himself. Zumaeta goes on to suggest that his own success at learning to read is a fulfillment of Sangama's prophecy, and a demonstration of the ability of breath to transmit knowledge (523-545).

We can now seen an additional dimension to Zumaeta's story, one located in the specific situation of its oral narration. The "Story of Sungama" is more than an account of a bygone era. It is more than the story of "the first Piro who could read". It was also, and perhaps more importantly, a gentle lesson in the efficacity of shamanic power given to the missionary Matteson by her pupil Moran Zumaeta.

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Notes

1. See Gow (1988) for a discussion of the importance of literacy and school education for the native people of the Bajo Urubamba.
2. The full text is in Matteson (1965: 216-233). The quotations from this text follow Mateson's English translation. The numbers following all quotations from this text refer to the linear numbers used in Matteson's original. I have made only one change: I have used the standard Spanish spelling of the name Sangama (which is a common surname in Amazonia), rather than Matteson's English version (Sankama) of the Piro form (*Sagkama*). The text of the "Story of Sangama" has also been reproduced in the SIL's Piro reading manual *Gwacha Ginakakle* (Ministerio de Educación (1974)). I have never seen this book

in use in a Piro village, and apparently the Ministry of Education has strong objections to the sectarian religious bias of its content.

3. Matteson records that she worked with Moran Zumaeta in 1948 (1965:2), and that he had a son of about thirty years old (ibid.:137). This suggests he was at least in his mid- to late forties when the text was recorded. Since he states that it was in his childhood that he knew Sangama, the events referred to cannot be placed after 1920, at the latest. But it is unlikely that it refers to a time earlier than 1912, the collapse of the rubber industry, for the circumstances of the story indicate a more settled existence than the upheaval and migrations that accompanied the later years of rubber production. Further, while I did not meet him, Zumaeta was still alive in 1982, and my comadre Lilí Torres Zumaeta, who is his granddaughter, described him to me as old but still active, which suggest he was not more than 75-80 years old. Taken together, these fragments of evidence suggest that the period of the story is from 1912 to 1920. (Postscript: I met Zumaeta in September 1988 in Miaría, but his illhealth prevented any interview. The importance of Sangama for contemporary Piro is indicated in the name given by Zumaeta to the organization of native communities based in Miaría, *Federación Guillermo Sangama).*
4. See Gow (1988) for a discussion of Piro narrative convention.
5. Fascination with writing is of course a classic feature of Melanesian "cargo cults" (Lawrence, 1964). Messianic cults of various kinds are a common feature of the cultural history of Southwestern Amazonia (Varese (1968)), but I have not heard of any other one in which writing played a prominent part.
6. The terms used in the narrative for "school", "enroll" and "teacher" are all Piro constructions, not Spanish loanwords.
7. It does not include figurative drawings, which are grouped along with photographs, in the category *yaglu*. (Strictly speaking, both *yona* and *yaglu* are ungrammatical forms in Piro, but I use them in preference to forms which specify possession or to the Absolute (Matteson (1965)).
8. Cf. Roe (1982) and Gebhart-Sayer (1984, 1985).
9. Cf. Gow (1988a) where I discuss this theme in more detail. As Gebhart-Sayer has demonstrated, Shipibo-Conibo shamanism uses design extensively, but precisely in the establishment of the cure, when the patient's body is restored to its healthful integrity (1984, 1985).
10. It seems unlikely that *killka* was borrowed directly into Piro as *kiruka*, and still less that the source was Cuzco Quechua, as Matteson (1965: 288) implies: following Piro phonology (Matteson (1965)), in neither case would borrowing produce *kiruka* in Piro. It is more likely that the term is a secondary loanword through another language. The Shipibo-Conibo *quirica* (Gebhart-Sayer (1985)) would yield Piro *kiruka*.
11. Cf. Gow (1988) for further discussion.
12. I have the strong impression that people on Bajo Urubamba exaggerate the incomprehensibility of curing songs. I found that my limited grasp of Quechua allowed me to understand at least some of the words of curing songs in Quechua, and I am sure that most people on the Bajo Urubamba could have done far better: Quechua may not be widely spoken there, but many Quechua words are used in the local dialect of Spanish. Similarly, Piro curing songs contain many identifiable Piro lexical items, albeit in odd combinations, and I suspect the same to be true of Campa curing songs. I would suggest that curing songs draw their efficacity (Lévi-Strauss (1963)) from precisely this fine balance between the comprehensible and the obscure.
13. The red dye *achiote* (Piro: *gapijru)* is associated with *ayahuasca* just as the black dye *huito* (Piro: *gmu/nso*) is associated with the hallucinogen *toé* (*Datura* spp., Piro: *gayapa*).

14. As indeed, they continue to be, for many native children from this area end up in Lima as house servants. Sensibilities have changed and they are now termed "employees", but conditions have not.
15. Native people, in conversation with me, frequently contrasted the school-based knowledge of writing to such forms of knowledge as mastery of design and shamanic power. Even if they no longer see literacy in directly shamanic terms, they use it as a metaphor by means of which to discuss other forms of knowledge transmission.
16. The logic seems to be that the dead twin serves as a natal "spirit companion" to the survivor. My informants assured me that only one twin ever survives, and denied that this is due to infanticide.

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