

The Amahuaca and the Spirit World¹

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The Amahuaca are Panoan-speaking Indians of the Peruvian Montaña. Unlike such better-known Panoans as the Shipibo and Conibo, who live along the broad and well-traveled Ucayali, the Amahuaca dwell near the remote and seldom-visited upper reaches of the Inuya, Sepahua, Purús, and Yuruá. Their habitat is an extensive region of rugged terrain covered with dense tropical rain forest lying near the Brazilian border. Their geographic isolation has kept the Amahuaca from being much affected by Western culture. Indeed they are among the least acculturated tribes remaining in the Amazon basin.

The Amahuaca have a Tropical Forest type of culture, but of a rather rudimentary sort. While they practice slash-and-burn cultivation, hunting is almost as important in subsistence as is gardening. A typical settlement consists of three or four one-family houses, with about fifteen or twenty people altogether. Communities are rather widely separated, and each is politically autonomous. Amahuaca social and ceremonial organization is exceedingly simple; even headmen and shamans are absent. Although the system of supernatural beliefs is similarly not very elaborate, it is nonetheless of some interest. In this paper I should like to describe that aspect of it dealing with spirit beliefs.²

No Amahuaca supernatural being is powerful or exalted enough to merit being called a god. The Amahuaca tell of a rather important culture hero, Rantanka, who taught them how to plant, how to hunt, how to make stone axes, and so forth, but he no longer plays a role in their lives, and in fact most informants say he is dead.

The only kind of supernatural beings which the Amahuaca consider to exist today and to play an active role in human affairs is a class of spirits known as *yoshi*.³ The word *yoshi* means not only spirit, but also shadow and reflection, and the term is applied to human souls as well. In this paper, however, I shall not discuss Amahuaca beliefs in personal souls.

Inanimate objects, like hills, rivers, or stars, are not thought to possess spirits. The spirits of the Amahuaca are all associated with a limited number of animals and plants.

The animals universally accepted as having *yoshi* are the jaguar, puma, ocelot, porpoise, electric eel, cayman, anaconda, boa constrictor, rattlesnake, carrion eagle, and king vulture. Some informants asserted that the owl, anteater, jaguarundi, and wolf also

have *yoshi*, but others denied this. In general, the animals believed to have a spirit are dangerous, or at least noxious. But fear or dislike of an animal alone is not sufficient to ascribe to it a *yoshi*. The bushmaster, fer-de-lance, piranha, and vampire bat, for example, have no *yoshi*. Deer, which among many tribes of western Amazonia are said to have spirits, or even to be the repository of human souls, are not so regarded by the Amahuaca. Another characteristic of *yoshi*-possessing animals is that they are considered unfit to eat. The only exception to this rule is the cayman. Again, the converse does not necessarily follow: not all animals whose flesh is avoided are considered to have *yoshi*. The giant armadillo is an example of this.

Some six or eight trees were spoken of as *yoshi*. All of them are large and imposing, and are characteristic of climax rain forest. One of them, the catahua (*Hura crepitans*), is dangerous to cut with an axe because its highly toxic latex may easily spatter into the eyes and cause temporary blindness. However, none of the other trees with *yoshi* has any such dangerous properties.

Although *yoshi* are the spirits of animals and plants, they are thought of as anthropomorphic. Indeed, the Amahuaca seem to regard them as looking somewhat like themselves, not only in physical appearance but also in dress. Not all *yoshi* look alike, for one was described as carrying flowers in its headdress, and another was said to wear a gourd mask. Some Amahuaca on Chumichinía spoke of *yoshi* as having fangs and eyes that shone like fire in the night. But they may well have derived this notion from the nearby Campa, who are known to entertain such beliefs. The Amahuaca of the Inuya do not visualize spirits in this way.

Yoshi do not eat or sleep, and they have no personal names. They possess neither chiefs nor tribal organization. They wander through the forest and may reside temporarily in an abandoned house. *Yoshi* never appear at Amahuaca ceremonies, and they are never impersonated.

Ordinarily *yoshi* are seen only at night. However, one informant on Chumichinía told us that, although a person can not see a *yoshi* during the day, he may inadvertently touch one. If this happens, the person will recoil, frightened, and take sick, since the *yoshi* will have stolen his soul. The common manner of appearance of *yoshi* is in dreams, but on special occasions seances are held in which visions of *yoshi* are induced by means of a narcotic.

Generally speaking, *yoshi* are not considered to be well disposed toward people. Some *yoshi*, e.g., that of the king vulture, are sometimes spoken of as good, but most of them are regarded as malevolent or even dangerous. This is especially true of the *yoshi* of the carrion eagle, anaconda, and electric eel. About certain *yoshi*, such as those of the boa constrictor and the jaguar, there was some degree of ambivalence.

Seeing a *yoshi* in one's dreams may have unfortunate consequences. One Amahuaca of Chumichinía attributed a nosebleed to a fight he had had in his sleep with a *yoshi* in which he affirmed that

the *yoshi* had kicked him. Some *yoshi* are believed to suck blood from a sleeping person, causing illness. Nevertheless, not all nocturnal encounters with *yoshi* are harmful; indeed, people often look forward to seeing them. The reason is that, since *yoshi* wander freely and widely, they learn a great deal about what is going on and can transmit this information to a person who encounters them. For example, a *yoshi* may inform a man that his wife is having an affair with another man. Or it may tell him how his relatives in some other part of the forest are getting along. Persons who have had considerable experience with *yoshi* may be able to secure their help in recovering lost objects. To a certain extent *yoshi* are thought to have foreknowledge, and they may warn a person that someone is planning to kill him.

One Amahuaca on Chumichinía told us that he had seen and learned a great deal about automobiles, machines, and other aspects of city life from *yoshi*. He said he wanted to close out his account with the *patrón* for whom he logged, build himself a little hut in the middle of the forest away from his two wives, and spend a year here consulting *yoshi* in order to learn all about civilization.

Despite such examples of their usefulness, *yoshi* are not guardian spirits or spirit helpers. There is no special association between a person and any particular *yoshi*. Moreover, *yoshi* do not ordinarily help the Amahuaca in hunting, warfare, or any other class of activities except sorcery.

The attitude of the Amahuaca toward *yoshi* seems to be one of mingled interest and fear—but certainly not one of awe or veneration. *Yoshi* have abilities above those of human beings and are inclined to be malevolent, so they must be contended with. But they are not worshiped or propitiated as a really powerful supernatural being might be. The Amahuaca make no offerings or sacrifices to *yoshi* and direct no prayers toward them. *Yoshi*, as such, cannot be killed or injured by human beings. If an animal possessing a *yoshi* is killed, no ritual deference is shown to its spirit. When a garden is being cleared, trees having *yoshi* are felled along with others, likewise without ritual.

Every now and then the Amahuaca hold seances in order to interact with *yoshi* in greater numbers and for a longer time than they usually do in dreams. While many Amazonian tribes rely on tobacco narcosis to achieve spirit visions, the Amahuaca do not. They make use instead of an infusion made from the narcotic plant *ayahuasca*⁴ (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), which has the power to produce extremely vivid and colorful hallucinations. To make the potion, sections of the *ayahuasca* vine, which grows wild in the forest, are first pounded and then boiled in water for about an hour. Sometimes one or two other plants may be added to increase its effectiveness. In any case, the stronger the potion the more *yoshi* one will see. *Ayahuasca* is usually, but not always, drunk warm, a little at a time. Before long, the drinkers begin to feel dizzy and start a very unusual kind of singing chant in a high-pitched tremolo in which the vocal chords are

tightly constricted. The men usually sit during these performances, but they occasionally stand and lean against their bows and arrows. As a rule each man sings something different, but what one man chants may sometimes be picked up and repeated by the others.

Ayahuasca seances may last a long time. One session we witnessed began about eight o'clock at night and did not end until nearly six o'clock the next morning. Throughout its duration of nearly ten hours the men continued to sing virtually without interruption, pausing only a few seconds to drink some more or to vomit.

As the drug takes effect, *yoshi* begin to appear, one or two at a time. They are said to drink ayahuasca, too, and to sing along with the men. The Amahuaca ask a *yoshi* where he has been and what he has seen, and he tells them. Unlike dreams, in which *yoshi* occasionally molest or injure a person, in ayahuasca seances they are generally friendly and tractable. It is just like when Amahuaca come to visit, we were told. A *yoshi* may stay an hour or two, and then he goes. But then another one comes, drinks with the Amahuaca, talks with them, and then he too departs. In this manner many *yoshi* may be seen and interrogated during the course of the night.

A seance may be held only one night, or it may be repeated on as many as four successive nights. But it is an extremely fatiguing experience, and, once it is over, the participants are not likely to engage in it again for weeks or months. "It's not something you do every day," as one informant put it. Some men never drink ayahuasca at all because of its very taxing effects on the system.

Taking ayahuasca for the first time is apparently a rather frightening experience for a young man. Some of them reported seeing snakes crawling up their bodies. The *yoshi* of the jaguar is the one most often seen at this time, and it teaches the apprentice drinkers all about *yoshi*. Some other spirits, such as those of the carrion eagle and the shihuahuaco tree (*Coumarouna* sp.), are also said to give special tuition to a beginner.

Certain restrictions attend the drinking of ayahuasca. Immediately preceding and following a seance men are supposed to abstain from sexual relations. Otherwise, it is said, they would get stomach aches. There is some indication that the effects of drinking ayahuasca carry over, and that a man will see *yoshi* more frequently in his dreams for several days following a seance.

Ayahuasca drinking is usually a social occasion. Several men drink and sing together, and onlookers, including women, are not discouraged from staying and watching. On such occasions people want to see *yoshi* simply to learn from them; nothing antisocial is involved. But in the privacy of his own house a lone individual may drink ayahuasca and invoke *yoshi* for decidedly antisocial ends, namely, witchcraft. In order to work witchcraft it is not enough to see a *yoshi* in a dream; one must summon him by taking ayahuasca.

Some *yoshi*, like those of the carrion eagle, ocelot, and shihuahuaco tree, have the power and inclination to work sorcery entirely on their own initiative. In most instances of sorcery involving

yoshi, however, the latter are sent on their malevolent missions by a human agent rather than acting on their own account.⁵ The most important *yoshi* connected with witchcraft is that of the jaguar. This *yoshi* appears to the sorcerer after he has drunk ayahuasca and tells him everything he wants to know, including the immediate whereabouts of the intended victim. To harm a person, a sorcerer may send a *yoshi* to shoot an invisible arrow or a thorn into him. If a man dreams that he has been shot by a *yoshi*, he begins to sicken and may eventually die.

The supernatural powers of *yoshi* can sometimes be turned to socially useful purposes. We witnessed one rather striking demonstration of this during our stay with the Amahuaca on Chumichinía. One day, shortly after we had moved into a house recently abandoned by an Amahuaca family, one of the former occupants returned and began to remove a pile of cane that lay in one corner. At the bottom of the pile he discovered a boa constrictor, tightly coiled. He quickly seized the snake and with the help of another man pulled it until it was extended to its full length. Almost immediately word of the snake's capture spread through the community, and from every direction women came running in a high state of excitement. Eagerly crowding around the boa, they began to pick at certain markings on its tail with the nails of their little fingers. At first the performance was completely mystifying, but its meaning was later made known. It was explained that, by scratching the markings on its tail, women could somehow prevail on the *yoshi* of the boa to lessen the intense pain that ordinarily follows the sting of a large black stinging ant that is commonly found in the gardens.

Among the various kinds of *yoshi* described by the Amahuaca there are two whose peculiar characteristics set them off from the others and who thus deserve special comment. One of these is the *wantati yoshi*, who were somehow associated with frogs and are now believed to be extinct. The females of these *yoshi* had vaginas lined with teeth, and when Amahuaca men had sexual relations with them their penises were bitten off. This, of course, is another instance of the familiar and widespread *vagina dentata* myth motif.

The *xawakándiwo yoshi*, who like *yoshi* generally are of both sexes, are considered to be incubi and succubi. They appear unsummoned in a person's dreams and have sexual relations with him or her. These visits are enjoyed by the Amahuaca, and as a rule there are no ill effects. Occasionally, however, after having had intercourse with a *xawakándiwo*, a woman may become pregnant. The offspring resulting from such a union is always identifiable because it is born with some physical impairment or deformity. It is called a *yoshiwakí*, spirit child. Unlike the *wantati yoshi*, *xawakándiwo* still exist, although their nocturnal visits are not especially common. They are supposed to wear long skirts and to live in wild pineapple plants.

The Amahuaca on Chumichinía are familiar with an entirely different kind of supernatural beings, unknown to other Amahuaca,

which they learned about from the neighboring Conibo. These supernatural beings are monsters in that in physical appearance they are neither anthropomorphic nor like any known animal. Rather, they are composites of parts of two or more animals, and in addition they have fabulous attributes not possessed by any *yoshi*. Moreover, it is the monsters themselves rather than their spirits who are the active agents. Following Conibo usage, the Amahuaca call these monsters *machaco*, a term which ultimately derives from the Quechua word *machacuay*, meaning snake. Indeed, most if not all *machaco* are part serpent. In conclusion, I shall briefly describe three of these monsters.

The *coto machaco*, or howler monkey monster, has a red serpent's body, two heads, and cries out like a howler monkey. It is very long and about four feet in diameter. It wraps itself around the limb of a tree with one head near the top and the other near the ground. It catches men who are out hunting in the forest by sucking them into its mouth from a distance of 50 meters. Another such creature is the *jergón machaco*, or fer-de-lance monster, a snake which has wings as well as fangs in its chest. When it bites a man he will almost surely die. The only possible remedy is to have sexual intercourse with a woman. If a man is bitten in the middle of the forest, with no women around, nothing can save him. If he is near a village, he may ask another man to let him have relations with his wife. Should the man refuse, the victim will die. A third such being is the *huasa machaco*, or squirrel monkey monster. It is a thin snake that comes at night and curls up on one's chest while one is sleeping. This alone is sufficient to produce death. When the victim dies, the monster leaves.

NOTES

1. In preparing this article for publication I benefited considerably from comments very kindly provided by Robert L. Russell of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who has worked intensively with the Amahuaca since 1953.
2. The data contained in this paper were obtained among two separate groups of Amahuaca: one living on the headwaters of the Inuya and the other residing on the island of Chumichinfa in the Ucayali. The former group preserves its native beliefs very nearly intact; the latter, which lives outside traditional Amahuaca territory, has undergone considerable cultural modifications as a result of recent contact with Peruvians and with other Indians, especially the Conibo and Campa. The Amahuaca spirit beliefs presented in this paper are the aboriginal ones, except as indicated.
3. The final vowel in this word is nasalized. Although not here indicated orthographically, nasalization is phonemic in Amahuaca.
4. This word is of Quechua derivation and means "rope of the dead" (*aya*, corpse, and *huasca*, rope).
5. Not all witchcraft is effected through *yoshi*. Sorcery is reputed to be performed mostly by means of magical thorns (*yoto*), which a sorcerer by his own power projects into the body of his victim, or through *yowiri*, ill-defined, evil-working powers which lack the attributes of personality but which may be possessed by animate or inanimate objects and can be directed against a person.