

“BECOMING” TSUNKI: THE CONCEPT OF CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE GENDER IMAGERY OF SHUAR ÁNENT¹

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Abstract: As one of the most identity sustaining genres of Shuar songs and singing in Ecuadorian Amazonia, the spiritual ánent songs are infused with spirits, ghosts, animals, and metaphoric beings, rooted in complex myths and personal narratives. They serve as tools for addressing and transforming specific life matters, with the singer aspiring to embody the spirits they invoke. Among these spiritual entities, Tsunki, a potent water spirit, transcending binary gender associations, emerged as a focal point in my explorations on gendered dimensions of Shuar songs and singing. Conversations with Shuar individuals like Raquel Antun, Tiris Taisha, Yampauch Tiwi, and Nujinúa Jimpíkit revealed varying perceptions of Tsunki, oscillating between a female, magical, and erotic spirit to a male figure akin to a god of water and healing. These diverse portrayals caused me to take a closer look at the gender imagery and the transformative elements within the Shuar ánent. This paper aims to explain how the ánent, as personalized musical and emotional projections of myth, possess the transformative power to construct, deconstruct, and transform identities and societal realities. Drawing on Deleuzian concepts of becoming and multiplicities, as well as Butler's theories on the social construction of gender, the analysis navigates through shifting subject positions of the singer and the human and non-human listeners involved in the ánent-induced transformation, including my own subject position. Acknowledging the colonial imposition of gender constructs on Indigenous cultures, the paper interweaves discussions on the impact of Christian missions and the coloniality of gender, drawing inspiration from María Lugones' work. Through contextual, analytical, and self-reflective lenses, the research aims to offer a critical

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view of the construct and deconstruction of gender within Shuar society. The perceived ambiguities surrounding Tsunki's gender also serve as a lens through which to analyze the complexities of coloniality and decoloniality within transcendent Shuar identities.

Keywords: Shuar ánent, Gender, Tsunki.

Knowledge Basis

This essay draws on original field research by the author in the Shuar provinces of Zamora-Chinchipe and Morona Santiago between 2010 and 2019 which is part of the author's doctoral research project on "Conceptualizing Songs and Singing among the Amazonian Shuar". The following main intellectuals' and singers' first-hand knowledge, mutual consent and later exchange informs this paper:

Raquel Yolanda "Tsapau" Antun' Tsamaraint: Shuar intellectual, uwishín, activist, poet, and dear friend, based in Sevilla Don Bosco, Morona Santiago

María Teresa "Tiris" Taisha: Shuar singer in Washikiat, Yacuambi, Zamora-Chinchipe. In 2012, at the time of our conversations, Tiris was of advanced age and blind. She passed away in 2022.

Rosa "Nujinúa" Jimpíkit Naanch: Shuar singer about 85 years of age at our first encounter in 2012, mother of uwishín Alberto Taisha in Jembuentza, Yacuambi, Zamora-Chinchipe. She passed away in 2015.

Rosa "Yampauch" Tiwi Shama: Shuar singer and eldest living member of the family in El Kiim, Yacuambi, Zamora-Chinchipe, was about 78 years old at our first conversations in her remote house in 2012.

Rufino Tiwi Shama: Brother of Rosa "Yampauch", also from El Kiim. His childhood was different to his sister's, as he grew up partly in the Franciscan missionary school.

María Luisa "Tsapaik" Tiwi Shama: Shuar singer and youngest of the Tiwi siblings.

Jaime Tendets: Shaman and evangelical Decan (??) in Kurints, Yacuambi

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to Raquel Antun, who has been a major force for clearing up so many open questions in my research. She has transcribed and translated song recordings when necessary, has welcomed me into her family, and shares not only her poetic and singing abilities as well as vast knowledge and involvement of Shuar culture and politics, but also her vision as a *tsuákratin uwishín* (healing shaman). Defying all the very serious past and current obstacles, that life has presented her with, she is amongst the most, if not the most inspiring human being(s) I have the honor of knowing.

Introduction

During field research between 2010 and 2019, I had the privilege to work with knowledgeable Shuar elders and singers³ whose magical songs, called *ánent*, are populated with spirits, ghosts, animals and metaphoric beings and are based on complex myths and individual stories. In and through these songs the singer aims at securing or changing a specific problem or life matter, and at transforming into the addressed spirit.

One of these spirits is the powerful water spirit Tsunki, who appears in different physical forms and whose name is assigned to more than only one gendered mythological figure.

In conversations with Raquel, Tiris, Yampauch, and Nujinúa, Tsunki was always associated with the element of water and to healing but described one time as a female, magical, erotic spirit, and another time as a male spirit, comparable to a god of water and healing. When learning about these different notions of Tsunki, I wondered whether it might be a type of non-binary or transgender spirit and therefore took a closer look at the gender imagery and at gendered factors of transformation as well as change in Shuar⁴ magical songs.

According to Elke Mader⁵ myths construct and define societal gender roles using powerful spirits as gender archetypes (2002, p. 22). Appearing in important female and male initiation rituals, Nunkui and Arútam⁶ may be the most sung about spirits and archetypes and throughout this analysis will serve as examples to understand the process of the singer's transformation. However, Tsunki is certainly one of the most transformative figures in Shuar magical ontology and represents many aspects of the past and current Shuar societal and gender matrix.

The aim is to explain how the *ánent*, as a personalized musical and emotional projection of myth, have the power to construct, transform, and de-construct identities, and societal realities. Philosophical tools for my discussion are the deleuzian concepts

³ I will refer to individuals by name whenever possible and will otherwise use the term singers or Shuar singers throughout this paper with the understanding that the individuals that collaborated with me throughout my research have a vast expertise on Shuar cultural, musical and societal matters. The responsibility of sharing spiritually powerful songs or other critical information goes beyond a conversation between "interlocutors" or "interviewpartners". The term "collaborators" would, on the other hand, neglect their level of active involvement or even their own agendas in working with me, which may be related to trading songs or to making their knowledge known amongst fellow Shuar or other supra-regional readers.

⁴ I deliberately use Indigenous with a capital "I" and Shuar with a capital "S" regardless of whether it is used as a noun or an adjective, reflecting a broader discourse on Indigeneity (see Hilder, T. 2017; Becker, M. 2008, Canadian legislation). Simultaneously "Indigenous" is also a colonial term and has varying connotations within and outside of South American "First Nation" groups. However, with the Shuar, the terms "Indígena" / "Indigenous" or "Pueblo Originario" / "Orinary Peoples" are used as a self-determined denomination when a broader sense than "Shuar" is necessary, connotated with more respect and self-worth than "Indio", or other derogatory terms used in and outside the country.

⁵ As my second doctoral advisor I owe so much of my knowledge and motivation to Elke Mader's extensive and ground breaking research with Chicham Aents peoples. Her unfortunate passing away in 2021 deeply affected me and many singers and Shuar individuals in Ecuador.

⁶ Arútam is the most powerful and overarching spirit, which in Christian-Shuar Syncretism is often compared to God. Arútam generally lives in Tuna, the waterfall, but is also a power fueling all other spirits and visions. Nunkui is a spirit representing fertility and the idea of mother earth.

of *becoming* and *multiplicities* in and through different forms of identity as well as Butler's theories of the social construction of gender. This paper shall provide a critical view on different, changing subject positions of the singer and the human and non-human listeners involved during the process of *ánent* induced transformation, including my own subject position. However, I understand the construct or importance of gender as a colonial imposition on colonized peoples. Colonizing Christian missions are an important thread woven through Shuar research, which adds to perceived and reproduced parameters and boundaries of gender, moral, and change. María Lugones' work on the coloniality of gender motivates my intent to view the discussion of constructs and deconstruction of gender, here, from different contextual, analytical and self-reflective angles.

Discussions on the perceived ambiguities of Tsunki's gender will help to demonstrate the complexity of coloniality and decoloniality within transcendent Shuar identities and their knowledge.

Ánent: Concept, Content, Transmission

In Shuar ontology, the *ánent* is a magical supplication and ensures the singer of the patronage of non-human entities, invoking benevolent help of the souls of deceased family members or calling and manipulating the *wakán*⁷ of beloved ones far away.⁸ The *ánent* is a communicative, ritualized and magic art, essential to protecting the cosmological balance of the Shuar world. It can for instance be a plea to crop and harvest directed towards the female spirit of earth, fertility and womanhood called Nunkui. It can also be an invocation to the strength and spiritual power of hunting or bellicose actions directed towards the spirit of the sun and hunting Etsa. Therefore, *ánent* are functional in daily life, serving as a medium for communication between humans and non-humans and possess a protective power for everyday activities. The fact that they are a bridge to non-human entities might lead to the assumption that *ánent* were applied by *uwishíns* (Shuar healers or shamans). As opposed to the *uwishín nampesma* (shamanic songs) the *ánent*, however, is a song genre that can be performed by all Shuar with knowledge of this fading art form instead of being limited to the very specific position and powers of the *uwishín*. In its traditional functional setting the *ánent* is not meant for a human audience. It is to be sung predominantly alone and directed towards non-humans. Exceptions to this practice are singing competitions, when teaching a child, when trading *ánent* with another singer⁹. Usually *ánent*, to this day predominantly transmitted orally, are passed on from mothers, grandmothers and aunts to the younger generation of girls – similar to a dowry; and less frequently from grand-/fathers to sons, as men tend to often “just think the *ánent*”.¹⁰

⁷ The *wakán* is the soul or spirit of every living or deceased being.

⁸ Other Shuar singing genres include the *uwishín nampesma*, shamanic diagnostic, healing and bewitching songs; *ujáj*, war and feuds related songs, and *nampet*, songs of joy, dancing, drinking and coded metaphoric language to disguise love related matters or jokes.

⁹ ...or in discussions with ethnomusicologists.

¹⁰ Raquel Antun states in an interview in 2019, that thinking an *ánent* can reach the spirits just as much as singing the *ánent* does. In her rituals of diagnostics and healing as an *uwishín*, in fact, she usually whistles or thinks the whistle of the *ánent*, as the whistle is a call for Tsunki.

Shuar children might learn the lyrics, melodies and purpose of the *ánent* over longer periods of time, but only receive the power to make the *ánent* effective with the spirits after having passed through initiation rituals of *Nua Tsankram* for girls and *Tuna* for boys. Through missionization/colonization these rituals have been practiced less or have in more urban or accessible areas vanished entirely. Movements of indigenization since the 1970s and more so after 2000 cause many dedicated communities, like El Kiim, and individuals, like Washington Tiwi or Raquel Antun' to revive or renew their cultural traditions, though, and are starting to perform these rituals again.

Variations, Trade, and Colonization of the *Ánent*

The narrative content of the *ánent* is highly complex. Certain lyrics and melodies, for example, may be varied to the singer's current issues and personal style. The variety of metaphoric meanings is difficult to interpret correctly, as they are directly linked to the individual performance of the singer on the one hand and the symbolic and spiritual structure on the other (Mader, 2004, p. 54). An *ánent* to yawá, the dog, might for instance simply be sung to honor, protect or empower the singers hunting dog, but could also be a metaphoric reference to a spirit like Nunkui. Linguist José Juncosa points out that there are no canonical versions of Shuar myths, as they are actualized, transmitted and varied with a stable subject, but never repeated word by word. They are influenced by situational contexts of communication, one's personal state and regional influences. The personal and regional characteristics of *ánent* are in parts due to the fact that Shuar songs tend to travel large distances since they carry a power worthy to acquire and were therefore traded amongst different singers (Juncosa 2005, 120) or even across different Indigenous nationalities, and memorized from public singing competitions. Singers such as María Teresa "Tiris" Taish' or María Luisa Tiwi often mention the contextual and personal source of their knowledge of a specific *ánent* as to honor the source of the *ánent's* power. Janet Wall Hendricks, who has analyzed Shuar power structures and regional as well as individual varieties of hunting *ánent*, states the following: "Hunting songs (, however,) may be bought or traded as well as taught by close relatives, and successful hunters are sought out for their knowledge of particularly powerful hunting *ánent* (sic!). Moreover, the practice of acquiring magical songs from other peoples is widespread. (...) Thus, in acquiring power and knowledge for hunting, the Shuar are encouraged to seek sources outside of their own group." (Hendricks, 1988, p. 219-221) The process of trading *ánent* is therefore an important factor for the acquisition of new powers, but also for creating change as the new owners may alter the lyrics using different protagonist figures or animals. Therefore, *ánent* are meant to travel, be adapted and personalized as tools for a wide variety of purposes and needs.

Not only trading and individual variety cause change to the *ánent*, though, but also the way in which non-Shuar have been interpreting them in their writing. It is important to be aware of the backflow of information and performance from results and observations that researchers and missionaries have achieved, as they are a crucial influence to Shuar opinion on what is right and traditional and what is not – thereby further influencing mythical and singing traditions and research results.

In terms of past research, religion and socio-cultural realities, Shuar territories are divided almost clearly into Salesian and Franciscan regions. Compared to the Salesian method of religious and cultural acculturation in the North, the Franciscans in the South, as in the province of Zamora-Chinchiipe still have a reputation of being far more radical in their evangelizing actions. To this day Shuar criticize the Franciscans' lack of respect for Shuar culture and language, their illegitimate appropriation of territory and their oppression of the Indigenous identity, language, and culture. So far, most cultural- and social anthropological research has been conducted in the northern, more accessible Shuar provinces of Morona Santiago or Pastaza. In consequence, the transference of knowledge from anthropological accounts in Northern regions on Southern Shuar realities has to be critically viewed when doing research on the dynamics of societal values and structures in the South. More importantly, a vast amount of the ethnographic work and safeguarding of Shuar traditions was and is done by religious figures, predominantly by Salesian padres, such as e.g. Juan Bottasso or Siro Pellizzaro. As valuable, meticulous and widely cited as their accounts may be, these sources should be used with a critical view concerning their general religious coloring as well as their matrix of Western ideas of society, moral, race, etc. With respect to the understanding of gender in the Shuar *ánent*, one must therefore pay special attention to certain aspects, such as the Western gender matrix and particularly the colonial binarization of gender applied to local social structures, and the biblical translations of local spiritual figures into Christian Saints – in intersection to their gendered imagery. The “Mitos Shuar” Series by Abya Yala, for instance, contains a vast majority of myths based on interviews and research conducted by Padre Siro Pellizzaro (1933-2019) and other members of the Salesian mission who were also trained and very active anthropologists. These books often contain very well transcribed Shuar myths and their translation from Shuar to Spanish as well as an interpretation that specifically serves the Salesians' agenda of communicating Christian moral, behavioral and gender norms in a syncretic manner. In Pellizzaro's *Reflexión*, for instance, the Tsunki myth is described to prove, amongst others, that “(...)- Man has the duty to search for God through religious rituals and fall in love with him. - God gives us strength through his sacraments. - In Shuar tradition, marriage is monogamous, because every man has to have only one *tarímiat* (wife). - Polygamy destroys marriage. - Every culture has its own customs, which have to be respected by members of other cultures. - The original sin is a serious sin of disobedience. The consequences for the original sin are illness and death. - The just receives the means for salvation from God.”¹¹ (Pellizzaro, 2014, p. 121-123, translated by the author) My critique is, that the Salesian reflection is presented like a Shuar book of rules for moral guidance mixed with some accurate explanations of cultural details. The translation of Arútam to God is entirely simplified to serve syncretic acculturation. Tsunki Núa is portrayed as to retrieve into her fathers arms of safety and is stripped of her own agency and power. Polygamy is judged as utterly immoral, which denies its embeddedness in the structural logic of Shuar relationships. In fact, this statement facilitates the moral interpretation of the Tsunki myth to be one of godly punishment in the form of biblical floods for ill behavior. Marie Perruchon argues that the emphasis is usually on “(...) how a Shuar man marries a Tsunki woman and gets power from her

¹¹ This is only a selection of the various points of reflections on the Tsunki myth.

(...) thus on Shuar relationship with the Tsunki people, not on the extinction of the Shuar.” (Perruchon, 2003, p. 322)

Of course, the researching padres’ positional influence on how the myth was told, transcribed, and interpreted remains uncommented in the “Mitos Shuar” series. Also, Pellizzaro talks about the importance of respect for culture and its customs, which now seems like an act of colonial gaslighting to whoever might have a glimpse of a doubt towards the points raised.

However, the “Mitos Shuar” Series is often the only written source of lost myths available to Shuar researchers and many Shuar communities looking to recover their cultural traditions and myths. Colonial or western notions of gender, moral, and religion are therefore perceived and reproduced through these books. As an effect, the specific characteristics of Arútam¹² and its differences to the idea of a Christian God, for example, are lost to common Shuar knowledge. Polygamy is mentioned with a hint of shame and as a social practice of a past long gone, however relevant it may still be. Without denying the Shuar peoples a new sense of ownership of this mythical syncretism and the related spiritual matters, in an analytical view of Shuar cultural content, its sources and the reproduction of sociological understanding shall be taken into account.

Approaching gender structures in Shuar identity

Shuar myths as well as songs are full of male and female connoted personifications forming or affirming gender identities through musical practices. As such, they are an indicator of a gendered Shuar culture. Judith Butler emphasizes that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman and that gender is a culturally constructed identity formed through the “stylized repetition of acts” (1988, p. 519-520). Butler is not referring to Indigenous Amazonian cultures or ontologies. However, Shuar culture reflects similar processes of iteration and repetition of gender identities. The Shuar gender matrix, drawn by ethnographers like Elke Mader (1999, 2002), Philippe Descola (2011), Anne-Christine Taylor (1996), and ethnomusicologist Emanuela Napolitano (1988) confirm that traditional myths and *ánent*, as such stylized and repeatable forms of gendered acts, have strongly affected the Shuar construct of femininity and masculinity through their representational power. As Butler writes: “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (Butler 1988, p. 531). I would argue, that the *ánent* as a performative tool for perspectivistic transformation further reinforces the idea of gender as something that can be put on like a skin or costume.

Two examples for male and female connotation in Shuar mythology are Nunkui and Arútam, two important spirits in Shuar cosmology who are an expression of the Shuar social order and represent female or male characteristics and their aligned responsibilities and tasks. Crossing these gender boundaries, however, is socially

¹² The same is true for any comparison made between Christian saints and Shuar spirits.

accepted amongst Shuar of different generations in certain contexts. Nowadays, proud Shuar men sing “I am a Nunkui woman” in the Nunkui *ánent*, which was formerly restricted to female singing and female audience¹³. Likewise, women like to perform the Tuna *ánent*, which is strictly linked to the male initiation ritual¹⁴ and was forbidden for women to hear and sing in the past. This development of ritually breaking traditional gender boundaries in the *ánent* leads me to assume that changing acts of gendered performances create the power to subversively transform the Shuar societal and gender matrix and vice versa. Furthermore, I suggest that these acts of breaking gender rules put in question the gender binary as well as the human – non-human divide as colonial ideas introduced by religious-/anthropological interpretation in the first place and are therefore an act of decolonizing the *ánent* and its powers.

A critical view on different subject positions during *ánent* singing

As mentioned above, the common *ánent* setting is between the human singer and the non-human listener or vice versa. The ritual performance should induce protection, a magical connection between the visible and the invisible, or even a transformation. The sensitivity of these matters renders it crucial to take into account the relationship, background, gender, age, and number of other human listeners that are present during the singing *ánent*. This causes me even more so to reflect on my own position and influence within this communication triangle. In El Kiim and to other research partners in the region, I did not represent Shuar womanhood, due to simply not being Shuar and partly due to the fact that I was there without the company of a man.¹⁵ I was not simply seen as a researcher either. I was rather the white woman from abroad, where many things are different. I was often compared to the single independent female teacher, an accepted but only temporary member of the community. Sometimes I was and am seen as a friend or later even an odd sort of family member after continuous research and ties to the community of now fourteen years. In any case, I am and was clearly an outsider to the Shuar social system of El Kiim, that I temporarily lived in. My research position was that of an investigating student rather than a woman within the given matrix, which is why certain restrictions or sentiments may not have been applied so strictly towards me. Therefore, I could for example listen and record Tuna *ánent*, even though I was not a male member of an initiation ritual. Alberto Taish, uwishin and son of Rosa “Nujinúa” Jimpíkit, taught me to play the *tumank* mouthbow, though women are usually not supposed to play the *tumank*. Following Shuar knowledge, the bones of a child or woman playing the flute or *tumank* could break, which is why he did not let his own granddaughter touch the instrument. I was not counted as a part of that impact-group in this case and most probably in other, less obvious situations.¹⁶

¹³ As did the late Agustín Tsukanka Tsunkinúa in 2012 with a cheeky smile on his face.

¹⁴ Tuna is a traditional male initiation ritual, where usually *ánent* are created and sung during hallucinogenic visions at sacred waterfalls.

¹⁵ Travelling without a husband and being childless at 31 created many questions upon these unusual decisions.

¹⁶ Thankfully, I don't seem to belong to the spirits' impact group either and my bones did not break during or after my 2012 field research.

My position towards the Shuar singers and their families changed strongly over the time I spent with them and with my efforts helping in their fields, teaching English, cooking for the family or taking care of their children. Furthermore, singing Austrian folk songs often opened up a musical dialogue, which was filled with a mutual exchange of musical knowledge. I was then implicitly accepted as a fellow singer, as a student, and as a trusted “trading partner” of songs and their power (see Hendricks 1988 as mentioned above). For the purpose of trading, my research partners have certainly shared a more wholesome knowledge of songs beyond any binary notions and rules. Despite this acceptance, the mere presence of another being in addition to the singer and the spirit is certainly influential to the performance of the *ánent*. But also gender transformation in Shuar ritual *ánent* settings is delicately dependent on the various influences of the parties involved, including their gender, their intentions, their age and their position towards the *ánent* singer. When a male member of the family was present, women did not intone the Tuna *ánent*, which is usually linked to the male initiation ritual of Tuna, the waterfall and to Arútam, the spirit residing in Tuna. However, for me and other fellow females, singers like Yampauch, Nujinúa, Tiris, and Tsapaik showed their knowledge of male repertoire with pride. By knowing the Tuna *ánent*, they not only show and trade their knowledge of their fathers and grandfathers, but also harbor some of Arútam’s powers, that come with these *ánent*.

The Singer–Animal–Spirit Triangle

“Nunkui núa asana” – “I am a Nunkui woman” – is an example of a songline that dominates every Nunkui *ánent*. In an *ánent*, the singer identifies with the addressed spirit and puts it on like a coat of protection and of power. Often, as is the case in the Nunkui *ánent*, lyrics start off with relating to the spirit directly (I am Nunkui) and repeating this like a mantra throughout the song. However, also an indirect relation is possible. Animals that represent the spirit are used in an *ánent* to create an intermediary between the singer and the spirit. Philippe Descola’s research with the Achuar *ánent*¹⁷ shows that this indirect way of addressing a spirit through the metaphor of an animal is done out of respect. (Descola, 2011, p. 103) The *yamala*¹⁸ or dogs, for example, represent Nunkui; snakes or fish represent Tsunki. Therefore, the *ánent* is not only a two-directional tool for communication (the singer communicating with the spirit and vice versa), but also a transformation and communication medium, which is built as a triangle. The spirit’s words inspire the *ánent* through dreams or visions, and the singer addresses the spirit via an animal through the *ánent*. Observations made through the course of this research show that through the *ánent* the singer metaphysically transforms into the spirit being sung to. Repeating “I am a Tsunki woman”, the singer transforms into the spirit and receives the spirit’s power. Linking this to Descola’s interpretation of an indirect respectful intermediary, the singer her or himself, within this transformed position, can also be seen as this intermediary instead of the animal. The singer *is* the spirit and describes the actions necessary to resolve

¹⁷ The Achuar Indigenous Group is part of the Aents Chicham language family and have many comparable rituals and traditions.

¹⁸ The Yamala, or in Spanish Guatusa (latin: Dasyproctidae), is an important animal and quarry in Shuar myth, song and cuisine.

the tasks mentioned. Essential to this transformation are the vocal techniques used by the singers: hoarseness, head and chest voice, breathiness or sudden transpositions towards the octave below or above. The personal metamorphosis through these lyrical and musical processes give the singer access to the spirit's power and create the impression of a second voice involved in the *ánent* as to imitate the spirit's voice.

The Deleuzian Concept of “Becoming” and How *Ánent* Create and Multiply Identities

Transforming from human to non-human, becoming more powerful, and shifting (gender-) identities indicate the *ánent*-induced dynamics. Here the act of change and transformation in the Shuar social matrix is discussed with a thought that Gilles Deleuze developed. It deals with the concept of identity and how it is linked with a continuous process of *becoming* instead of the static concept of *being*. Judith Butler writes about how we *become a gendered subject* and how we even *become our own gender identity* (Butler, 1991, p. 165) – an identity which, according to Deleuze, is in itself subject to multiple processes of becoming: “The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.” (Deleuze, 2014, p. 291) These two multiplicities are a compound of the individual and the social identity. Each has multiple layers (*multiplicities*) on its own which are in a constant process of change (*becoming*). Deleuze intertwines the multiplicity of the individual identity, as in the individual's multiple layers of being or *becoming*, with the identity defined by the collectiveness, as in society. “Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization⁽¹⁹⁾ according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities.” (ibid., 8) The *ánent* functions as a medium for this crossing of two worlds, therefore allowing for a change of multiplicities, a transformation from the single identity to the other multiple identities, from the individual to the collective, from the human to the spiritual being, and from the being to the *becoming*.

According to the Shuar conceptualization, the *ánent* also stands for “being Shuar” within their socio-cultural context. Thus, it embodies an important role for the collective Shuar identity and as a medium for the performance and representation of their culture. “El *ánent* es el verdadero arte Shuar”, the *ánent* is the true Shuar art, as stated by Shuar singers, such as Jaime Tendets (Jembuentza, 2012) and Rufino Tiwi (El Kiim, 2016). Some of them layered their collective feeling of identity as first Shuar, then as Indigenous and after all as Ecuadorian. Of course, all individual and social identities would add to these collective ones, like coming from a certain region and village, being Christian, being a mother, father, son, daughter, sister, etc. As for any other individual, “being Shuar” also involves a constant process of individual transformation. Shuar are *becoming* Christians when there is mass, Shuar when there is a traditional event, hunters when there is not enough meat, and they become *ánent* singers when they are not sure whether they can accomplish all their duties without the help or the bodies and the power of the spirits. They not only shift back and forth between the evangelized colonized world and their *Shuarness*, but also between their

¹⁹ Deterritorialization is understood as the socio-cultural disembedding through the socio-cultural crossing of two worlds.

visible and the invisible world of the spirits, which forms a crucial part of the Shuar understanding of reality.²⁰ I argue, that Shuar ánent singing, its importance for Shuar self- and collective identification, as well as its transformational purposes are a very complex example of Deleuze's idea of *becoming* and *multiplicities* or the variability of identity.

Tsunki and the Musical Metamorphosis

Tsunki, as one of the central magical figures in Shuar ontology, is associated with rivers and water as well as with a giant anaconda, other water snakes, or water animals in general and the source of all shamanic power. Already in 1986 Michael F. Brown viewed these different myths and stories as contradictory and researched "Tsunki's sex" (1986, p. 52–53). Since Tsunki is a mythical figure, its biological sex seems irrelevant. Rather, it is the socially constructed image of its gender that is of interest in this paper. Brown found Tsunki to be described as male in some myths and as female in others. I was confronted with the same problem when consulting different Shuar singers about Tsunki: Tsunki is described as the first shaman, a powerful and authoritative father figure, male spirit of the water by some; but at the same time, Tsunki is also his beautiful gleaming daughter, a woman with long shining hair and the ability to transform into other beings. Much to my bewilderment, my early attempts to get a clear explanation about the limits and meanings of Tsunki's gender consistently failed. Anthropologist Marie Perruchon describes a similar research experience and that she heard often that "gender doesn't matter" when it comes to Tsunki. She describes there to be not only Tsunki father and Tsunki daughter, but a whole family of Tsunki. Only when asking about her collaborators' personal experiences with Tsunki, there seemed to have been clearer accounts of male and female Tsunki. Apparently "men made love to female Tsunki and women made love to male Tsunki". (Perruchon, 2003, p. 317) I suggest that the binary division between male and female here is linked entirely to a Western idea, the Christian anthropological adaptation and its backflow, as mentioned above. In reality, the question of whether Tsunki is female or male seems to mainly interest outsiders of Shuar culture, including myself of course. For *uwishín*, such as Raquel Antun', becoming Tsunki means acquiring *tsentsak*, the magic darts or the power to suck the foreign *tsentsak* (illness caused by bewitching) out of the patients' bodies. In that manner, I believe that one can not only "be" or "become" Tsunki, but also "have" or "aspire to have" Tsunki as a quality of power.

Rosa Nujinúa Jimpíkit and her son Alberto Taish summarized and translated their version of the main Tsunki myth: "When a young Shuar man, who gets lost by the river shores after hunting and killing a Yamala, first sees Tsunki bathing in the river, she is an enchanting and lucent mermaid. Half fish from her hips down and half woman from her waist up.²¹ The young Shuar immerses himself into the water together with Tsunki moving towards her parents' gigantic palace under the water. In the presence of her parents, the man proposes marriage to Tsunki and offers the Yamala for his first

²⁰ For more in depth discussions of Shuar collective identities see Bammer (2018).

²¹ The idea of Tsunki as a mermaid seems to be a common, more recent alteration. Most written sources describe Tsunki as a beautiful naked woman (see Perruchon, 2003, p. 319; Pellizzaro, 2014, p. 89).

meal with his new wife and in-laws. After this celebration in the palace, the young Shuar and Tsunki emerge from the water and secretly live together for many years. But Tsunki is not like his other human wives. During the day she is a red serpent, secretly kept in a basket which nobody is allowed to touch or open. And at night she transforms into a beautifully bluish lucent woman who then sleeps with him. One day, while the man is hunting, the children he has with his other wives find the serpent outside of her basket on the ground. Out of fear the other wives try to kill it with a bat. Tsunki, as the serpent, quickly escapes into the water, never to be seen again. Tsunki's father, revenging his daughter's honor, floods everything with water until only the top of a palm tree is visible. It is this palm tree to which only the Shuar man together with his little daughter are able to cling and rescue themselves."²²

To summarize the spirit's main qualities, Tsunki Núa (Shuar for Tsunki woman) is associated with passion, hypnotizing beauty, love and desire. She is able to transform into a serpent, which is the *uwishín*'s animal, and along with her power over water, she is also able to heal. Tsunki's father is also called Tsunki. He is a great powerful and dominant man, who lives in the water and does not turn into a human. He takes revenge on humanity when he realizes his daughter was not treated well.

Of course, the myth is told in various different versions. Sometimes the other wives would already be suspicious from seeing their husband at night with the lucent woman and kill the snake out of jealousy. Here, they kill the snake unknowingly of her involvement in their own family structure. One constant factor in various of the versions I heard is the Yamala which the young Shuar hunts, kills and later eats together with Tsunki's family as a type of offering for Tsunki's hand. In coded metaphoric meanings, the Yamala, an animal associated with earth, stands for Nunkui. According to Elke Mader, Nunkui represents the normative ideal of the female identity, fertility and motherhood as well as the female power over nutrition, the earth and a woman's productive abilities (Mader 2002, p. 10). Nunkui is the complete opposite of Tsunki as the erotic temptation to all men and reason for envy and admiration to all women and has qualities many Shuar women secretly aspire to have. Tsunki protects female sexuality, even if it violates social rules. She protects the rule breakers and is a symbol of strength (ibid., 16).

Rosa Yampauch Tiwi,²³ when asked about the Tsunki myth and whether she had seen the shining spirit she describes as Tsunki Núa, answered that she knows of her existence but was unfortunately never able to see her with her own eyes. Male members of her family, like her brother Rufino, stated that Tsunki indeed appeared to them during walks in the dark, during *natem*²⁴ visions or in their dreams, always pointing out her unusual beauty and sparkling appearance. The appearance of Tsunki, or the wish for it, may be interpreted as an unconscious desire for secretive love, but is also connected to the wish for spiritual and shamanic power. As opposed to other ethnographic accounts, Marie Perruchon states that shamanic power and sexual

²² The session took place in Rosa's house, an old tiny school building in Jembuentza on August 17th 2012. English translation by the author.

²³ Rosa Tiwi is estimated to be 78 years old. The interview took place on July 31st 2012 in her house, secluded from the main village by a bridgeless river, based in El Kiim, Yacuambi, Zamora-Chinchipe.

²⁴ Natem is a hallucinogenic drug, similar to Ayahuasca, used for curing and achieving visions.

attraction are not contradictory but instead reinforce each other (Perruchon 2003, 326). This is because in Shuar myth Tsunki's human husband was the first of all *uwishíns*, who achieved his shamanic strength through the old Tsunki, his father-in-law. The erotic attraction of Tsunki Núa is also synonymous with *tsentsak*, the magic darts used in shamanism. It is said that the shaman's sexual abstinence is equated as a love relationship to a woman from "the other world", possibly meaning Tsunki. Another female figure in Shuar mythology connected to Tsunki is the first female *uwishín*, Súa (Descola 2011, p. 341-342). Some rarely told narratives mention Súa as the old Tsunki's wife or Tsunki núa's mother.

The myth of Tsunki also reveals important details on traditional family and kinship matters. As in the myth, the ideal traditional Shuar family consisted of a matrilineal extended polygynic family forming the basic social and political entity (Mader, 2002, p. 334). Traditionally, communities consisted of far distributed long houses, which were inhabited by these extended polygynic families. Alliance through marriage was therefore decisive to social organization and the networks of local groups.²⁵ It is therefore not surprising that in addition to his other wives the Shuar man in the Tsunki myth seeks to find yet another partner, which in the form of beautiful Tsunki Núa, opens a connection to spiritual powers to him.

Elke Mader analyzes the dynamics of marriage alliances in the Tsunki myth. The three-way relationship between father, daughter and husband are a central element of the social organization in Shuar society, including the long residence of a husband in his father-in-law's household, often strengthened through a sororal polygyny. The woman gives her husband access to her father's power, but also surrenders him to her father's authority. The father remains 'his daughter's master'; "The relationship with Tsunki is ambivalent: beauty and attractiveness versus responsibility and danger from the powerful father" (Mader, 2002, p. 15, translated by the author).

Perruchon mentions the Tsunki ánent only in relation to shamanic rituals. In my research, however, Tsunki ánent are described to appear together with anything related to snakes, shamanic power, fish or water and usually stand for passionate desire, a man's imagination of the ideal erotic symbol, a woman's intention of seducing a man, or as a reminder of marital duties of protection. Singing a Tsunki *ánent*, a woman may, for instance, remind her husband not to treat her badly, threatening with her father's anger and power. Rosa Yampauch shared, that a man who tries to convince a girl to marry him, would sing of himself as a fish, representing Tsunki.²⁶ This would be contradictory to Mader's theory that the man represents the human part in the Tsunki myth. Yet, it is also possible to think the man as desiring to be the Tsunki Núa for her seductive ability or instead to transform into the old Tsunki for his shamanic powers in order to impress the woman in question. Also, the man's personification with

²⁵ In the past 30 years, the dynamics of Shuar communities have changed. Nowadays most houses are gathered around a center square in a village community, resembling a mestizo community architecture. Matrilocality is not obligatory and polygamy is forbidden by law, but continue of course in less public forms.

²⁶ This ánent was never directly sung to me – possibly for its implicit aim of either seduction or the acquisition of *tsentsak*.

the old Tsunki as the first shaman and husband of the first female shaman, Súa, is possible (Descola, 2011, p. 342).

The degree of transferability between the spiritual and human subject positions can be seen in one of Siro Pellizzaro's examples of a Tsunki *ánent*:

Apáwaru apawáchiru,	Papacito mío, padre mío (My little father, my father)
Kajé kajétuya awajtípiani, awajtípia.	No estés siempre con iras conmigo, no estés, (Don't always be angry with me, don't be)
Náintia kínkiajariyana, aya tímiaiyana,	desde las montañas en penumbra, sólo desde muy lejos, (from the mountains in twilight, lonely from very far away)
Tsunki nua asána,	siendo yo una mujer Tsunki, (as I am a Tsunki woman)
enentáichirínia wíkia achirsáttajme.	Su corazoncito yo te cogeré. (I will take your little heart)
Enentáimturu pujurtíntme.	Que piensas en mi pudieras estar. (As you think of me, you could be.)
-lmiátkíntrinchaua- tiniu ármiayi.	-que no tiene otro con quien juntarse (fiel) eso solían decir. (-as he has no other with whom to be together (faithfully) – they used to say)
Tsunki nua asana,	siendo yo una mujer Tsunki, (as I am a Tsunki woman,)
apawáchiru kajé kajétuya awajtípia,	Papacito mío con muchas iras no estés, (My dear father, don't be angry with me,)
wíkia imiamtikrashtátjame.	Yo misma te haré inmortal (haré que no te acabes) (I, myself, will make you immortal)

Pellizzaro states, that this *ánent* is sung by a woman, aiming to make her husband less jealous and less suspicious of infidelity. Also, she wants to make him more consistent in his loving dedication towards her and to make him perceive his wife as the fertile and shiningly beautiful Tsunki (Pellizzaro, 1977, p. 164). “Papacito mío, don't be angry with me, I myself will make you immortal”. It seems like something between a loving plea to her husband to believe her truthfulness and a threat of power in case he does not treat her well. “Papacito” is often used as a pet name for the husband or partner instead of the father. However, the reference of the father and his anger clearly points to father Tsunki and his smoldering protective anger as well.

José Juncosa offers another view of Tsunki as a hermaphrodite being and symbol of conjunction between the masculine-sylvan spirit of Etsa and the feminine-terrestrial figure of Nunkui, just like the water as a natural element, which unites the sky and the earth in the form of rain. This unifying element of Tsunki is also evident through its aquatic character, which according to Juncosa is of highly erotic meaning for the Shuar on the one hand, as well as the shamanic symbolism of the snake on the other (Juncosa, 1999, p. 136-137).

Interpreting these lyrics correctly is quite complex as they are not meant to be interpreted by an audience. They are directed to the souls and spirits, sung by the female singer, who in this case thinks of herself as Tsunki Núa. Boundaries between subject positions may seem blurry to the reader or listener but are part of a perfectly ordinary conversation and transformation between the singer and the spirit.

The fluidity of Tsunki's gender is also present in the tonal quality of the songs, as can be shown by a Tsunki *ánent* that Maria Teresa "Tiris" Taisha sang to me.²⁷

Her melody line, as is common for any *ánent*, consisted of three notes: 1) the first scale note (comparable with a tonic), 2) the third scale note, and 3) the fifth scale note, including the octave below the fifth. Vocal techniques are thought to be important to "make an *ánent* work" as a medium of communication with the other side, i.e., the spiritual entities. The right usage of vibrato, head and chest voice as well as breathiness and intended roughness especially in the female singing is highly relevant for connecting with the spirits. With Tiris' Tsunki *ánent* a strong change of a very breathy head voice or falsetto and a strong chest voice with the lower notes can be detected. It appears as if it were two voices singing – a higher female and a lower male voice. In her lyrics she talks of Tsunki Núa and the man who finds her. The two voices artificially construct two vocal layers, as to speak for two different entities. In this case they might musically represent Tsunki and her husband-to-be.²⁸

Conclusion

Learning more and more about the *ánent*, I was surprised of every new level of change I could detect in different songs. The research of 30 to 100 years ago as well as the stories told by elderly Shuar drafted a picture in which gender segregation in social and private Shuar life and particularly in Shuar *ánent* chanting was utterly strict. Songs dedicated to Nunkui were strictly linked to female connotations and were thought to be too powerful for men to hear, let alone sing them themselves. At the beginning of this article, I suggested that through the *ánent*, gender roles in Shuar society can be constructed, deconstructed and merged into a neutral space.

²⁷ Maria Teresa "Tiris" Taish, Recording: 18th August 2012, Washikiat, Yacuambi, Zamora-Chinchiipe. Tiris only sang parts of this *ánent*, so the lyrics recorded are interrupted and lack the complete story line, which is why her lyrics are not analyzed here.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion on Shuar vocal techniques and sonographic visualization thereof, see Bammer 2015.

My intention of answering the question of why nowadays proud Shuar men start their Nunkui *ánent* with “I am a Nunkui woman” led me to three possible interpretations: 1) they also want to transform into the powerful female spirit; 2) they actively want to dispose of all unnecessary traditional or colonial gender boundaries, and subversively do so by singing these songs; or (3) it is an act of dominance over the female repertoire. For current performances of Shuar songs, the first possible interpretation may be explained by what West and Zimmermann described as “doing gender” (1987). In traditional Shuar song, gender is “done” or constructed by telling myths including the traditional family matrix, by typical day-to-day tasks and interactions, and by singing. Present *ánent* performance leads to the conscious dismantling of gendered images (as in the second interpretation), which Francine Deutsch calls “undoing gender”, or even “gender irrelevance” when it comes to higher priorities than societal gender rules (Deutsch 2007, 116). In Shuar song, this would coincide with the spiritual goal of the *ánent*. If nowadays gender is “undone” in the *ánent*, it is ultimately an act of change and the active deconstruction of gender boundaries. The “undoing” of gender could also point to the Christian and/or anthropological construct and imposition of gender.

Change and transformation, or even mutation, are by no means new to the Shuar *ánent* as they have always been the implicit purpose of this functional and magical song genre. The singer crosses the boundaries between the visible and the invisible world – causing a change of spiritual territories. By singing to the spirits, the person wishes to reach them in their own language and tune – causing a change of communication mediums. At the same time the latter causes the metaphysical transformation from human to the spirit addressed in the *ánent*, which is one way to receive the spirit’s power. Additionally, the *ánent* transmission within the family, its journeys between the different regions and especially individually personalized versions of it causes a mutation process.

Analyzing *ánent*, perceived and recorded in very personal settings, the subject position of the researcher has to be turned into a noticeable subjectified factor of change, as the *ánent* performance is adapted according to the presence of other human listeners.

This leads to the hypothesis that the *ánent* is a three-directional communication and transformation tool (triangle), as it uses animals as respectful intermediaries towards the spirits and also transforms the human into the spirit. Spirits communicate to humans through the voices of the animals and in that manner also teach them their language.

As explained above, the Shuar put the *ánent* on a level with “being Shuar”. Considering the numerous levels of change and factors of becoming and multiplicities within Shuar identity and the lyrical, musical, spiritual and performative act of singing *ánent*, as in Deleuze and Butler, I suggest that the *ánent* actually represents the “becoming Shuar” or even “becoming Shuar multiplicities”. Therefore, shifting positions are not new to the *ánent* and are not only linked to current changing generational, gender and development factors. Instead, the processes of transformation

(interspecies) and change (renewal) have always been the only fixed parameter in spiritual communication between two worlds.

The ambiguity in Tsunki's identity and its influential power on society described in myths and songs represent the strength and the two faces of every social situational and relational matter in Shuar society. Especially the Tsunki *ánent* makes clear on which levels the *ánent* deals with transformation and how useful this can be for the Shuar. Tsunki Núa morphs from an aquatic being to woman to snake and is also associated with fish and with water. The singer who sings "I am a Tsunki Woman" mutates into Tsunki in order to satisfy the implicit wish of enhancing the own erotic appearance, to be the desired female on their beloved man's mind, to obtain Tsunki's passionate desires and healing powers or to obtain tsentsak, the shamanic darts. She also represents and protects the exception to a normative social value. Singing *of* and as Tsunki helps to *become* and to identify as the spirit. Singing of father Tsunki on the other hand promises a change in spiritual or shamanic power or warns the addressed of the father's protective revenge.

However confusing the question of Tsunki's gender may be to the outsider, Shuar consider it only relevant when referring to sexual experiences with Tsunki. This suggests, that Tsunki exists as a powerful and transformational spirit, regardless of any assigned gender and reminds us of the essential difference between the socially constructed gender and the biological sex. As a researcher of Shuar songs and singing, Tsunki has taught me, that in some cases only my acceptance of the cultural irrelevance of certain gender questions can shed some light on complex Shuar social dynamics and musical meaning.

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