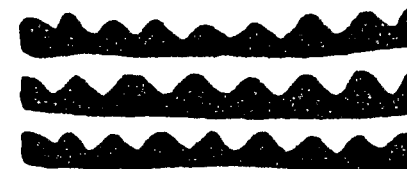




PORTALS OF POWER



SHAMANISM IN
SOUTH AMERICA



Edited by

E. JEAN MATTESON LANGDON
and GERHARD BAER

ORSTOM Documentation



010004870

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Cote: Bx 4870 Ex: 1

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS
Albuquerque

A variation of chapter 5 was published in *Anthropos* 82 (1987): 567–580, under the title “Shamanistic Symptoms and Symbols.”

Chapter 9, originally titled “Personne n’est là pour écouter,” was published in French in *Amerindia*, no. 12 (1987).

A slightly different version of chapter 11 appeared in *Ethnohistory* vol. 33, no. 1 (Winter 1986).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Portals of power: Shamanism in South America/edited by E. Jean Matteson Langdon and Gerhard Baer.—1st. ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8263-1345-0

1. Indians of South America—Religion and mythology.
2. Indians of South America—Rites and ceremonies.
3. Shamanism—South America.
4. Folk medicine—South America.
5. Hallucinogenic drugs and religious experience.

I. Langdon, E. Jean Matteson, 1944-

II. Baer, Gerhard, 1934-

F2320.1.R3P67 1992

299'.8—dc2091-42609

CIP

Design by Stephanie Jurs

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First edition.

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NOBODY IS THERE
TO HEAR

*Desana Therapeutic
Incantations*

DOMINIQUE BUCHILLET

For the Desana, words are endowed with a physical effect. They are able to affect the intimate experience of an individual in a tangible manner. This power to interfere in the order of things was given to words by the Desana's ancestors. The current ritual specialists, known by the name of *kūbū*, do nothing but reactivate this power. The potentially creative power of words is particularly evident in the curing rituals that rest fundamentally on the efficacy of the spoken word.¹

The Desana are one of the several Eastern Tukanoan groups who inhabit the Brazilian-Colombian Vaupés region. This region belongs to the central northwest Amazon culture area whose main features are: extensive cultivation of bitter manioc (*Manihot esculenta* Cranz) combined with hunting, fishing, and gathering; riverine orientation of the settlements; uniformity of social organization and structure; rich mythology whose main lines are common to all Tukanoan groups; and male initiation rites tied to a kind of ancestral cult (Steward and Faron 1959). Within this homogeneous system the Tukanoan are divided into discrete intermarrying groups, mainly differentiated by territorial location, language,

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and artistic specialization. The Desana occupy the Vaupés River and its affluents, the Tiquié and the Papuri, in a dispersed settlement pattern. Due to the influence of the Salesian missionaries working in the region since 1915, villages composed of individual houses have replaced the ancient communal houses. The abandonment of the communal house, or *maloca* in lingua geral, has profoundly disorganized the ceremonial and ritual life. Serving as more than a living place, the *maloca* was an essential ceremonial center, the true place of the transmission of myths and of their performance during rituals. It was often designated by the expression "house of ceremonies," a denomination that attests to its important ceremonial purpose.

The Desana traditionally recognize several ritual specialists representing different concepts of power who exercise the functions of preventing and curing illnesses:

1. The jaguar shaman *ye*: The term *ye* places emphasis on the shaman's capacity to borrow the form of the jaguar in order to accomplish his goals. The power of *ye* is tied to the use of *paricá* (*Piptadenia peregrina* Benth. or *Virola* sp.), ruled by the Thunder World ancestor, who is also the master of aggressive incantations.² The jaguar shamans are described as "able to see the illness in the patient's body," and to "divine the cause of the evil." The role of divination is strictly associated to the intake of hallucinogens in Desana thinking.

2. The *sakaka* shaman: *Sakaka*, a lingua geral term, represents another class of shamans who reside in the subterranean world. By chewing the roots of the *sakaka* plant (probably *Connaracea*), they are able to travel great distances underwater.³ These shamans, considered the most dangerous by the Desana, are strictly associated with aquatic spirits, "their relatives."

3. The *kūbū* shaman: The third class of shamans is that of the *kūbū*, whose power rests on a perfect mastering of incantations, *bayiri*, for protection, curing, and aggression. To recite an incantation is *bayi* in Desana, but this term has also the more generic meaning of "ceremony" or "cure." The Desana generally translate *bayi* "to pray." This term reveals the verbal aspect of the cure, putting the emphasis on the principal activity of the *kūbū* in every ceremony or cure. In one sense, the term "to pray" is not ill chosen because it illustrates perfectly well the attitudes of meditation and of silence (so appropriate to prayer) during the curing session and illustrates, moreover, the sacred character

of the "texts" and their link with the primordial language of the ancestors. However, the preferred translation of *bayiri* is "incantation," since this term better indicates the pragmatic character of the uttered texts. (See examples later in this chapter.) The therapeutic knowledge that every individual desiring to be a shaman has to acquire is submitted to a strict rule of transmission.⁴

THE METHOD OF TRAINING THE KŪBŪ

"I have learned, seated with my father." This phrase so often reiterated by the Desana *kūbū*, summarizes perfectly the method of training and the ways of access to the function of *kūbū* "One learns by listening." Training consists essentially of hearing and memorizing a large number of mythic narratives and incantations. The apprentice *kūbū*, *kūbū pegi*, is literally "the one who listens," and his master, *kūbū bayiri weregi*, the *kūbū* "who recites the incantations." The priority attributed to listening in the process of acquiring shamanistic knowledge is again reflected in the vernacular term that designates intelligence, the faculty to conceive things, *pebāsīdī*. It is formed of *pe*, "to listen," "to hear," "to comprehend," and *bāsīdī*, "to understand," "to know."

One learns by listening. Memorization is facilitated by the intake of emetic potions (unidentified) at dawn in order to purge the body of all the substances that could impede access to knowledge. Beyond this purification for the preparation of the spirit, an "incantation by which one becomes *kūbū*" (*kūbū suriye bayiriye*) is recited over a cigar, whose smoke should be exhaled around the apprentice's body.⁵ The smoke functions as a stimulant and serves to "fix the individual on his bench," or to "make him sit down in only one place." It helps him to retain his thoughts and prevents distraction. This intimate connection among the Desana of the bench, the thought, and the act of concentration has already been noted by Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971, 110; 1975) who remarks that this association is explicit in certain metaphorical expressions. Thus, of an individual who lacks judgment, in other words, who doesn't think well, one will say "he doesn't know how to sit." The bench is the proper place for concentration and meditation. While seated on his bench, Yebá Biro, the ancestor of the world, began to think about creating the world (Panlon and Kenhiri, 1980). It is while seated on their bench that the *kūbū* effect their cures. This bench has existed since the origin of time,

and it is intimately tied to thought and reflection.

Knowledge is never revealed through violent experience. The observations of Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975, 197) on the training of the Tukano shaman apply perfectly here. "A Tukano *payé* does not receive a sudden call to office in an overwhelming traumatic experience, but develops his personality slowly and steadily, the driving force being a true interest in the unknown, and that not so much for the purpose of acquiring power over his fellow men as for the personal satisfaction of knowing things which others are unable to grasp." The notion of physical and mental suffering, so often present in the biographies of South American and Siberian shamans is not, however, absent in that of the *kūbū*. All insist that those who want to learn must submit themselves to fasting before and during the learning experience. My work sessions with them were frequently studded with reflections that underscore this dimension of power acquisition. "For you, with your tape recorder and your notebooks, it is easy to learn this incantation. For me it was very difficult. I had to fast and remain awake one entire night to learn it."

Knowledge is transmitted patrilineally, and one is *kūbū* by family tradition.⁶ The father generally chooses the one among his sons who by his behavior seems most apt to exercise the role according to his behavior and his interests. The teaching is gradual. The initiation to knowledge, to comprehension of the mythic narratives and the therapeutic and aggressive incantations, is slow. Some are taught first, for example, those incantations destined to take care of problems considered minor (headaches, sores, burns, diarrhea), the knowledge of which is not restricted to specialists. Other incantations are meant to be taught at the end of the learning experience, for example those intended to recapture the soul of the patient. This gradation in the transmission of shamanistic knowledge reflects an increasing difficulty in memorization and in comprehension of sometimes very long passages, a complexity that is generally equivalent to the supposed seriousness of the illness. One of the difficulties encountered in learning these incantations is their length, that is, the number of animals, objects, and substances to be memorized and invoked during a cure. Another difficulty lies in understanding their hidden meanings, the rules of specific word use and their references in the incantations that make them part of a very complex symbolic language.

The apprenticeship is generally composed of two phases. The son first learns all the incantations of protection and curing. When his father

judges that he has internalized them, that is to say, when he has perfectly mastered both the literal and the symbolic meanings of the incantations, he begins the second phase of the apprenticeship—when the novice is introduced into the world of aggression. The incantations of aggression are secret, and they can only be taught to a son. Only one who has the hereditary right can benefit from this teaching, a symbol of the spiritual relation that ties a son to his father, and, through the latter, to the ancestors holding this knowledge.

Knowing the incantations of aggression provides, so to speak, the key to the illnesses by disclosing their origin, their essence. To know the origin of an illness gives the holder of this knowledge the power to cure it. Thus, knowledge and apprenticeship of the means of aggression secure the positive efficacy of therapeutic knowledge. The learning experience ends with the cigar ceremony, which consecrates the apprentice in the career of *kūbū*. Reciting an incantation over a cigar, the father gives the cigar to his son to smoke. This incantation is supposed to put in reserve, or leave dormant in one part of the *kūbū*'s body, the shamanistic knowledge that will only be revealed in a concrete situation. It is as if the incantation conferred to him a power of oblivion: "He doesn't think anymore about what he knows, he is like a child," the *kūbū* often says. This ceremony is, in fact, a protection against the untimely use of shamanistic knowledge. It protects the learner from the dangers of experimenting "just to see," which would do nothing but provoke needless illnesses. The danger of experimenting out of context is well-illustrated by a number of myths. For example, one describes how Butari Gōābi, God of Laziness, created numerous diseases just for the sake of checking the worth, either positive or negative, of his knowledge. These myths, in one sense, set up a posteriori, a validation of the real efficacy—negative (cause of illness) or positive (therapeutic)—of the aggression or curing incantations that constitute the shamanistic repertoire current to all *kūbū*. It is necessary to understand this ceremony as a kind of precaution against a memorized and interiorized knowledge that is conceived as dangerous.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF ILLNESSES

The Desana term that designates illness is *doreri* derived from the verb *dore*. This verb is not limited to the domain of pathology. "To give an

order to," "to send to," and "to command" attest to its principal meaning. *Dore* carries, therefore, an idea of order, of commanding, which refers to a scheme of aggression, to an exterior origin of the illnesses. For the Desana, in fact, sicknesses are mainly imputed to animals, spirits, or to humans. In addition to "the illnesses of the whites," attributed to a form of specific sorcery, the Desana distinguish several categories among the "indigenous sicknesses":

1. Catching illnesses, *behari*: these are the common illnesses without a known cause, which cannot be attributed to the work of a spirit nor to that of a sorcerer. These sicknesses are often described by the Indians as "passing from one to another," and "coming by themselves" without one's knowing why. In general they are denoted by the expression *behari* followed by the description of the symptom, *behari etokarikiri* "passing illness with vomiting," or simply by *behari*; this expression accentuates their benign and transitory character.

2. *Wai bāsā doreri* and *yukī bāsā doreri*: respectively, "sicknesses of fish people" (and, by extension, "of the water people") and "sicknesses of the tree people." This category groups all the disorders tied to the life cycle as due principally to the action of animals and spirits. The Desana conceive of the animal world in the image of the human world. The animals are directed by "animal-shaman," *wai bāsā yeri* or *yukī bāsā yeri*.⁷ The lizard (*Plica plica* L.), the jaguar (*Panthera onça* Podock), the blue morpho butterfly (*Morpho* sp.), the cuckoo bird (*Piaya cayana* L.), and so on, are the principal animal shamans cited by the Indians. These animal shamans are also known as "masters of the illnesses of water people," as well as "masters of the illnesses of the tree people." They are not linked to a specific illness but to all the sicknesses that can happen to a person during certain critical periods (birth, puberty, death), or to any individual after transgression of the dietary taboos that are normal at times of rituals.⁸ These illnesses generally appear in an ambiguous fashion through imprecise symptoms such as muscular pains, back pains, fever, swelling of the body, vomiting, and so forth.

Animals by themselves cannot provoke illnesses. The Desana always present them as species inoffensive to man; they have to be manipulated by the animal shamans or by a sorcerer in order to cause sickness, thus becoming the cause of it. The animals then try to strike the individual with their "weapons" (parts of their bodies that become injurious to the individual), thus provoking different troubles. The sicknesses of the

"water people" and of the "tree people" are often the result of a personal error (i.e., dietary transgression during a ritual period), or of the errors of others (i.e., *kūbū*'s forgetting one or several animal or spirit names during the recitation of the incantations of protection).

3. *Goroweori doreri*: sicknesses due to the sorcery of the shamans, the *ye*, the *sakaka*, or the *kūbū*. These sicknesses are distinguished by their perfectly defined clinical picture. Their effects are restricted to a determined part of the body, and they are, therefore, easily recognized and identified by observation of the dominant symptom (for example, breast tumor, inguinal tumor, menstrual colic, local swelling). These sicknesses can be provoked by the intrusion of a pathogenic object into the victim's body or can be thrown on the body as a garment, a cape.

The connections established here between a symptom, an illness, and a given cause are ideal. In practice, that is in the course of an illness, there can be continuity between different sickness categories. In the beginning, illnesses are always considered benign. After failure of family therapy based principally on plants or incantations the sicknesses are interpreted on a second level of complexity. Indeed, the resistance of the illness to words and plants, the intensity of pain, the patient's social history, his age, the occurrence of other passing disorders, and so forth, can offer complementary information, thus modifying the previous diagnosis and, therefore, the therapy.

THE CURING RITUAL

The cures take place during the day or night in the *kūbū*'s house if the patient is able to travel, if not, in the patient's house. The ill person comes alone or accompanied by a relative. It is not necessary, however, that he be physically present at his cure. This depends quite evidently on the seriousness of his sickness. At the very most, he should remain within hearing distance of the *kūbū*'s voice. Seated on his small bench, the *kūbū* recites an incantation over the opening of a gourd (*Lagenaria siceria* Mol.) containing a liquid, or over a plant.⁹ Resting beside him on the ground is a calabash (*Crescentia cujete* L.) containing some green powder of coca, which the *kūbū* takes frequently.¹⁰ With the aid of a small spoon or stick, he places it for an instant on his tongue so that the coca is impregnated with saliva. After taking a dose of coca to "revive his memory," and "not to sleep," the *kūbū* begins the cure by drawing

out, through his thoughts, all the "defenses" of the individual (defenses placed at the moment of his birth at the time of naming ceremony). Afterward he "opens" the body, the veins, the arteries, the bones, the intestines, and so on, of the patient in order to permit the sickness to run out. Finally, he recites the incantation to himself while exhaling or blowing on the opening of the gourd or on the plant at certain precise moments of the recitation.¹¹ The incantation is carried by his breath to this object. At the end of the cure, the *kūbū* hands the gourd to his patient, who is expected to drink the contents. If the object over which the incantation is recited is a plant, the patient should rub it on the sick part of his body. Cures vary in duration proportionally to the seriousness of the sickness. The *kūbū* generally recites the incantation several times in succession, each time giving to the ill person the liquid to drink or the plant to rub. The cure implies, therefore, a manipulation of an intermediary object or substance. For the Desana, this object, which gives the incantation a material support, functions in the manner of a "medium"; it transfers the incantation to the patient.

SUBSTANCES UTILIZED AS A MEDIUM OF INCANTATION

The intermediary object is, therefore, of two kinds: liquid or plant, chosen in function of the kind of sickness or symptom to be treated. If the sickness is internal, the *kūbū* will prefer to use a liquid: water; boiled manioc juice (that is to say, detoxified); manioc flour gruel; and so on. Beyond the fact that the liquid carries the words to the patient, once ingested it cleanses him, purges him metaphorically of his sickness. In certain cases, the liquid has a parallel effect to the incantation in that it reinforces the desired effect. Thus, in the case of a difficult labor, the *kūbū* will recite the "delivery incantation" over a potion prepared from the juice of certain fruits known to be particularly viscous (*Pouteria caimito* L.; *Rollinia mucosa* (Jacq.) Baill.; *Theobroma grandiflorum* [Willd ex Spreng] Schum; *Pourouma cecropiaefolia* Mart.; *Urera uraricera*; etc.).¹² For the Desana the viscous juice of these fruits, once ingested by the woman, lubricates the womb, thus facilitating the delivery. It is clear that this viscous liquid reinforces and reduplicates the incantation's therapeutic efficacy, which aims at the expulsion of the infant or of the placenta (see *infra*).

On the other hand, in the case of wounds, burns, or local pains, the incantation will be recited over a part of the plant (bark from a tree or vine, leaves, flowers) that will be placed, rubbed, or expressed in liquid form over the affected part of the body. For example, in caring for a wound, the *kūbū* will recite the incantation over certain particularly bitter barks of a tree or vine, which have been grated or mixed with a little water (*Anacardium occidentale* L.; *Byrsonima* sp., etc.). This bitterness cleans the wound, removes coagulated blood and impurities, and closes tissue.¹³

The presence of a physical characteristic useful in the cure (as in the two cases cited, viscosity and bitterness) often prevails in the choice of plants used as the medium of incantation. Plants and incantations do not have independent contents. The plants can reinforce the therapeutic efficacy of the language, but they do not replace the action of the latter. Thus, in the case of a difficult delivery, the *kūbū* will recite the incantation over any available liquid if there is no juice at hand from viscous fruits. This is because "all has been treated by the incantation." In other words, this quality of viscosity necessary to the treatment of the pregnant woman is already transferred to her body through incantation. Words for the Desana are by themselves capable of giving a quality to, or transforming physically, a being or an object. As we have seen, the intermediary object over which the incantation is recited, by its own analogous characteristics, can increase the therapeutic efficacy of the incantation by reduplicating it. Moreover, it seems to confer to the incantation a greater power of penetration by the simple act of ingestion or direct contact with the skin, in other words, of being physically introduced into the body of the individual. Stated another way, "The verbal message is capable of greater precision than the figurative language (one with the help of an object). But the advantage the second has over the first is its permanence and its materiality, which makes it remain always available and that it is possible to receive through other means than those of speech utterances (by absorption, by anointment, by aspersion)" (Lavondes 1963, 110).

Words offer a resistance to time. Once absorbed by the liquid or by the plant, they are always available to the individual without the risk of being changed. Before the arrival of a son who lives in another village, one informant often would recite an incantation of protection over a

cigar. According to him the power of the incantation could not weaken even if the son didn't smoke the cigar until some time later.

It is important to keep in mind that the intermediary object over which the therapeutic incantation is recited is not indispensable. The incantations are effective by themselves; that is to say, they have the power, by themselves, to change, to transform a person. The incantations could very well be recited in the direction of the ill person, and it is not the object that gives the words healing power. However, the Desana admit that in this case the actions of the words on the sickness will be slower, the incantation having a lesser power of penetration. When speaking of the liquid carrier of the *kūbū*'s words, the Indians frequently say "it is like an injection."

THE STRUCTURE OF THE INCANTATIONS

The incantations are not a metaphoric evocation of the state or intimate condition of the patient. (See, for example, the archetypal case of Cuna songs.)¹⁴ They do not implore the help of any spirit and are not addressed to someone in particular from whom knowledge or support is expected. These incantations do not use a language that is injunctive, supplicatory, conjuring, or objurgatory. In their totality, they look like a long enumeration of names of spirits, animals, plants, and substances having direct connection with the source of the sickness, or with the restoring aspect of the cure. In general, they are designated by the name of the sickness (for example, "incantation of the breast tumor"). The incantations always have the same basic structure. They consist of a rather long continuum of sequences with two movements, the interior of each movement having a characteristic overture and end. These two movements can be defined as identification of the protagonists of the shamanic act and restoration of the body or affected part of the individual.

Identification of the Protagonist of the Shamanic Act

By reason of their relation to the source of the evil, of the sickness, the protagonists must be named. This involves identifying, by name, the animals, spirits, plants, and substances; their color (or brilliance, the luminosity of their bodies), and sometimes also their habitats. Then their "weapons" are enumerated, and, finally, the *kūbū*'s activities to neutralize

them are described. The principal "weapons" of the animals or body parts potentially harmful for the individual include: skin, hair, or skin parasites; limbs (paws, wings, fins, tails); teeth; beaks; residual body heat; liquids such as blood, sweat, urine; odor; skin reflection; cries (songs), and so forth. Material objects and plants are considered dangerous by reason of their inherent heat. They are "hot" because they are born from the cindered body of the "master of nourishment." By implication, so are all the objects obtained from these plants, such as bows and arrows, handles of knives or machetes, fishing lines made from the fibers of *tucum* (*Astrocaryum tucuma* Martius), calabashes, and gourds. All the cooking utensils made from different types of earth or clay are equally hot by reason of the cooking processes to which they have been subjected. Likewise, machetes, axe heads, fish hooks, and so on, are hot because they are made of a metal that was smelted and shaped at high temperatures.

The heat inherent in these beings, plants, or objects is supposed to provoke fever, headaches, and also frequent household conflicts. The person is caught in the middle of this hot environment, which excites him and provokes frequent quarrels between him and his neighbors. The danger of these plants resides equally in the parasites that inhabit their different parts (roots, trunks, or bodies, branches, leaves, flowers, or seeds).

The verbs of the incantation offer a detailed account of the *kūbū*'s activities toward each part of the animal's body, or of the plants that can be dangerous for the person. The *kūbū* "tears out," "breaks," "pulls to pieces," "chews," "washes," and "cools down."

The incantation presented below, *yarue wēhēdā bayiri* (literally, "incantation of the groups of earth worms that kill"), is meant to cure a sickness that affects the newborn when the *kūbū* forgets one or more names of earthworms in the course of the incantation protecting the bath at the end of the couvade. The latter, not named and therefore not disarmed, are liable to strike the infant with their weapons, provoking fever, rash, inflammation of the body, headaches, or vomiting.

These earthworms *wāsīkābī*, the black, the greenish, the whitish, I have joined the parasites [literally, "those that inhabit"] of their limbs; I tear their legs; I break their teeth; I break them; I throw them all in the subterranean world ["toward the source"]; I cool them [I "cut" their heat]; I express the fluids of their bodies [I "cut" their liquids]; I catch their smell [I "cut" them]; I wash them from head to foot.

Restoring the Body of the Sick Part of the Individual

The second movement of the incantation consists of invoking certain plants, animals, or powers such as stars, or angels and saints (recently introduced into the incantations), which possess properties particularly relevant to the cure. For example, there could be viscosity for facilitating delivery, bitterness for disinfecting and repairing a wound, black color for making a wound invisible on the surface of the skin, or coolness for refreshing a burn.

The name of the animal or plant chosen is immediately followed by the designation of its required attribute, then by the *kūbū*'s description, which details the manner in which he instills it or lets it drip into the patient's body, or else how he paints the body with it. In the course of a delivery, the *kūbū* will shed (through language) a liquid coming from the viscous fruits in the vaginal opening and on the body of the newborn. After having named all the fruits he says, "I pour the viscous liquid of these fruits in the door of the birth canal of this Tukanoan woman who is called X, I pour it [on the body of the infant]. I take it out [the infant]; I take it out. I pull it down."

In the case of burns, the *kūbū* will invoke the bats, which in their mythology have to do with their origin. "Large or small bats living in the roots, large or small bats living in the trunks, large or small bats living in the holes of trees . . . I collect them, I take from them their coolness, I catch it, I pass it [over the burn], I throw [the bats] over the body of the patient, I cool down [the burn]." The logic of this incantation lies on the observation that, according to the Desana, when bats fly at night over our sleeping bodies, they cool us "by making wind with their wings." The *kūbū*, through words, throws them and has them fly over the burn to cool it down, thus reducing its heat, its "fire." Then invoking their color he proceeds: "I gather these bats, I catch their color, I pass it [on the burn], I pass it, I paint [the burn], I paint it." This operation is aimed at making the burn invisible on the skin's surface.¹⁵

The words of the incantation trace sickness to a number of animals, spirits, plants, and substances, and describe the way these animals or these plants—realistically represented down to their finest anatomical details—are collected, put together, destroyed, and expelled from the person. The words then tell how, at the time the person's body is

restored, an animal's or plant's attribute necessary to the curing process is transferred to the body through the words of the *kūbū*. Animals and plants are at all times passive instruments of the shamanistic activity. The efficacy of the incantation depends on the different operations of the *kūbū* aimed at neutralizing them or at restoring the body of the patient. The verbs of the incantation refer only to the actions of the *kūbū*. They all are conjugated in the first person singular, in the present indicative of the active form. In so doing, the Desana emphasize the pragmatic value of such statements, which according to them, are uttered to act upon the patient's body. The therapeutic action is set in motion by the words themselves. Thus, when the *kūbū* wants to pull out the limbs of some parasite, he grants himself the power to do what he says, and this he manages by reciting the appropriate incantation. Animals and plants are named, one by one, and the parts of their bodies or their organs, their "weapons," are carefully enumerated. For the Desana, the incantatory formulation of the name of an animal or plant is sufficient in itself to give it both form and existence. The frequent process of denotation by synecdoche (part of the body for the animal, organ for the plant) is meant to reinforce the act of naming, trebling an effect aimed at physically placing animals and plants in the presence of the *kūbū*, thus giving him a chance to control and manipulate them.¹⁶ This process also confers a supplement of strength to the *kūbū*'s actions in the phase of the final destruction of the animal or of the pathogenic object.

Desana mythology attests, in the same sense, to the creative powers of naming. For example, in the origin of fish

The *Diroa* took a large bowl and began to strike the surface of the water to attract the anaconda. Hearing this noise, he soon appeared. They captured him; killed him. Finally they turned the flesh of the anaconda into fish. The first fish that they created in this manner was the carp. Taking up a piece from the anaconda's flesh they gave it the name of *boreka* [*Leporinus* sp.] and decided that it would be "good to eat." To the second fish, they gave the name of *uru*, the *pacu* [*Myloplus* sp.], this time "bad to eat." The third fish, the piranha, was the "fish of envy." When one eats its meat, one feels full of jealousy towards others. . . .

Thus they created all the fishes giving them names.

The incantations are infallible in curing illnesses in the sense that their power to cure is never questioned. The nonresponse of an illness

to words, the intensification of symptoms, or the appearance of additional ailments are never attributed to any failure or defect inherent in the incantation. The lack of reaction of the illness to the *kūbū*'s words is, in fact, understood as nothing less than a forgetting of one or several animal or spirit names during the recitation of the incantation, or of an inaccurate diagnosis. The effect of the cure is immediate. The repeated absorption of the same words should immediately produce a decrease of the symptoms.¹⁷ An indicator of this belief in the rapid efficacy of the words is provided by the use of an expression that generally ends all curing incantations, *siyĩ*, *siyĩbea*, *siyĩdoa*; respectively, "I calm it down," "I have him sit quiet," and "I leave him quiet and peaceful." In the last words of the incantation, the sick person must be calmed, reassured. These expressions are the signal that the words of the *kūbū*, once they are absorbed by the patient, have already left an effect on the illness, in other words, that the *kūbū*, by these words, dominates the sickness. So we can say that, for the Desana, the words reel off in the body of the patient like the beads of a necklace.

CONTEXT

As we have seen, the incantations are recited secretly over an intermediary object (a liquid, a plant). One should now examine the symbolic function of this speaking under the breath, of this silence. One hypothesis is that this inaudible aspect, which is the mode appropriate to the cure, confers to the *kūbū*'s language a particular power. One myth insists that incantations ought not to be heard.

The *Diroa* were dead. Then the old woman began to stop up their mouths, the noses and all their body openings with leaves. Then she recited the incantation but the *Diroa* were very smart. They had pretended to be dead so they could see what the old woman would do, to learn all her words. Simulating death, they went out of their own bodies and settled on each side of the old woman to watch all her gestures, to listen to all her words. This is how they learned the incantations.

A little later, the myth tells how, in order to bring the old woman back to life, the *Diroa* reproduced the gestures they had just learned; they closed her ears to prevent her from hearing their incantation. Thus, this

myth insists on the fact that therapeutic language is not meant to be heard, or better, *to be listened to*. Therefore, the cure doesn't present any didactic aspect either for the patient or for anybody who might attend. "Nobody is there to hear," the *kūbū* often say, which means that, on one hand, the curing session is not thought of as a means of acquiring knowledge. An individual cannot, therefore, hope to receive training by attending curing sessions, as is often the case in many indigenous societies. On the other hand, the session is in no way expected to fashion the shape of the mind (see in particular the analysis of Lévi-Strauss [1958] of the Kuna chant *Mu-Igala*). In fact, the silent aspect of the cure doesn't as much explain the secret character of the incantations as it insists on the necessity and importance of their social circumscription. The acquisition of shamanistic knowledge is thus dependent on a spiritual genealogy. This knowledge can only be transmitted and applied by certain people who "are distinguished . . . not by their 'natural' characteristics and capacities but by their social relation to others: namely by standing in a continuous line of legitimate succession to an original founder" (Skorupsky 1976, 149). The private character of the cure responds to a practical necessity: this is a protective measure against a knowledge that is perceived as dangerous when it is used out of its specific context or when it is applied by laymen.

A rapid survey of the recent ethnological literature on the efficacy of speech in magico-religious rituals shows two major orientations: some explain the efficacy of speech by the particular construction of magical discourse (rhetorical mechanisms and the performative aspect of magical language), others by the evocative power of the sound of words.

Two articles by Tambiah (1968, 1973) perfectly illustrate the first orientation. According to Malinowski (1974), the incantations are recited over an intermediary object, which transfers the incantation to the specific person by the magical act. In spite of the insistence of the Trobrianders that "the strength of magic lies in the incantation," Tambiah shows that the intermediary object and incantation cannot be considered separately. Austin (1962) states that certain utterances are enunciated not to inform or account for a state of things, but in order to realize an action, what he terms the performative aspect or the "illocutionary force" of language. Tambiah, adapting this theory to the analysis of ritual, shows how object and incantation operate jointly.

... in terms of predication and reference the words exploit analogical associations, comparisons and transfers (through simile, metaphor, metonym, etc.). The illocutionary force and power by which the deed is directed and enacted is achieved through use of words of commanding, ordering, persuading, and the like... The action can be similarly analysed. The objects manipulated are chosen analogically on the basis of similarity and difference to convey meaning. From the performative perspective, the action consists of an operation done on an object-symbol to make an imperative transfer of its properties to the recipient. Or to put it differently, two objects are seen as having resemblances and differences, and an attempt is made to transfer the desirable quality of one to the other which is in a defective state (1973, 222).

The second orientation is illustrated by Stoller, who shows that, for the Songhay, the sound of the words carries the magical efficacy: "Sounds of magical praise-names, magical words, and magical sacred instruments create an auditory presence that can transform a person morally, politically and magically" (1984, 559). In order to be efficacious, the words must therefore be pronounced, listened to, and heard: "Sound penetrates the individual and creates a sense of communication and participation" (ibid., 563).

The conclusions of Tambiah apply perfectly to the Desana example: one has seen the function of the synecdoche as a rhetorical means that confers more strength to the manipulation of the pathogenic object by the *kūbū*, the importance of the substances, chosen for their analogous characteristics, which were introduced into the patient's body through the *kūbū*'s words, and the effect of reduplication of the meaning of the incantation by the substances used as a medium. Nevertheless, it seems difficult to account for the power of the incantation (according to the indigenous theory) on the sole basis of the construction of the incantation. The positive efficacy, that is to say the therapeutic efficacy of an incantation, also depends on the respect of certain conditions in formulation of therapeutic knowledge that narrowly define its accessibility (importance of the spiritual genealogy) and its use: the therapeutic knowledge cannot be used except in two contexts, each being characterized by an appropriate mode of recitation (inner recitation in the curing situation, or audible utterance in the situation of apprenticeship).

The therapeutic speech of the Desana is a silent speech and without an addressee. Its mode of operation violates the principal functions of language perceived as a means of communication and translation of

thought. Under this private and silent aspect, the therapeutic ritual of the *kūbū* differs from the shamanistic cures usually described as a sort of dramatization, by gesture and/or voice, of the combat that the shaman wages with the spirits. Lévi-Strauss (1958) has shown that the efficacy of the cure depends on a triple experience—that of the shaman, that of the patient, and that of the attendants (participating or not)—and also on the key role of the audience, which, by its participation, stimulates and reinforces the curing powers of the shaman. On the contrary, the cure carried out by the *kūbū* is a solitary ritual: the *kūbū* doesn't give anything to see, nor does he give anything to hear. "Nobody is there to hear," the Desana insist. The shamanism of *kūbū* is a shamanism of silence, and in this lies its originality.

NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION (DESANA)

consonants	voiceless	p, t, k, s, h, ' ,
	sounds	b, d/r*, g, y
		w

*Kaye (1965) interprets /d/ and /r/ as allophones in complementary distribution with the phone /n/: the first two appear only in oral context, the last one in nasal context.

vowels	i	ĩ	u
	e	a	o

At the phonemic level we find nasal consonants and nasal vowels. Kaye (1970) showed that nasality is a feature of the entire morpheme and not only of one of its components. The nasality affects consonants and vowels in a nasal morpheme. It is a feature of morphology. The voiceless consonants p, t, k, s, h are not sensitively affected by the nasalization process. According to Kaye, the phones m, n, ñ, ng are nasal realizations, respectively, of the phones b, d, y, g, and not particular phones. b is pronounced (m) before or after a nasal vowel, d is pronounced (n), y is pronounced (ñ) as in the Spanish "mañana" and g is pronounced (ng) as in the English "tongue." In this article the nasalization is represented with a (-) disposed over the vowels of the nasal morpheme.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Translated by E. Jean Matteson Langdon and Alroino B. Eble. A shorter version of this article was presented in the symposium "Lenguajes y palabras cha-

mánicas" at the Forty-fifth International Congress of Americanists (Bogota, July 1-7, 1985) under the title "The conditions of performance of the therapeutic language among the Desana."

I wish to express my thanks above all to Batista and Raimundo V. for the depth of their teaching. I would also like to thank P. and F. Grenand, P. Menget, B. Albert, and S. Hugh-Jones for their critiques and valuable suggestions, M. Menget and M. J. Robert for their revisions of the translation. The plant and animal identification was made with the collaboration of A. Gely and P. Grenand, whom I thank. The data on which this article is based were collected during several trips made in 1984 and 1985 in the region of the Brazilian Vaupés and realized within the agreement on scientific cooperation between Brazil and France (Agreement CNPq/ORSTOM). Finally, I thank the Fundação Nacional ao Índio (FUNAI) for having given me research authorization in the upper Rio Negro region.

Notes

1. Two works present similar material: one by Reichel-Dolmatoff (1976) who studied metaphors of the spells and their relationship with Desana society and culture; the other one of T. Langdon (1975) who examined food prohibitions in the context of Barasana and Taiwano ritual and the preventive and curative spells of illnesses provoked by food transgression.

2. The identification of this plant is not certain (see Wassen and Holmstedt [1963] on this subject).

3. According to P. Grenand (personal communication), the hallucinogenic effect of this plant is not yet proven, but its toxic effect on the organism is certain.

4. The research was realized until now with *kūbū*. There are practically no *ye* or *sakaka* shamans still existing on the Tiquié where I am doing research, both because they have fled the intolerance of the Salesian missionaries, who upon settling the Tiquié in 1945 hastened to condemn all shamanistic practices, and because they have not found anyone to whom to pass on their knowledge. The quiet character of the *kūbū*'s therapeutic ritual, however, undoubtedly contributed to maintain their practice and permitted them to resist better the missionary intolerance. Their activity, which depends on the interior recitation of an incantation, is solitary. It doesn't require any of the aspects of the collective ritual in the traditional shamanistic sessions. The existence, at the heart of Desana society, of three ritual specialists responsible for the functions of prevention and cure of illnesses poses some interesting problems. It would be

necessary, in particular, to analyze the relations between these different specialists and their actual social function. Have the *kūbū* always taken care of the illnesses, or is this function recent, following the disappearance of the *ye* and of the *sakaka*?

5. "Without this incantation, I would have never been able to learn," the *kūbū* often say. There exists another incantation, stronger because it invokes the hallucinogenic *paricá*, which permits them to learn through dreams. Finally, one can learn from a hallucinogenic vine "that makes *kūbū*" (*Banisteriopsis* sp.). It is, for the Desana, the rope or vine of understanding, of knowledge. The individuals subject to the power of this vine or of the incantation must respect certain food restrictions (avoid fat food, roasted or smoked meat). Disrespect for this rule results in madness.

6. It is necessary to distinguish the true shamans from those who know only some incantations. In one sense, every adult man is a little *kūbū*. Many of those who are married and are fathers seek to learn from their fathers or from their fathers-in-law (or even from an unrelated *kūbū*) a few incantations that might help them face certain problems of daily family life (delivery or minor ailments). The embarrassment of having to ask a nonrelated *kūbū* to attend to their family problems, more than a true interest in learning, motivates them in this case. Their protection and curing activities are limited, in any case, to the family sphere. There are very few who use their knowledge and their competence to help others. The social character of the function is a fundamental element.

7. The exact nature of these animal shamans is still unclear. Are all the animal species of the dolphin, of the jaguar, etc., the animal shamans? Are there individuals not marked spiritually? And are these animals animal-shamans or spirit-shamans? Finally, it is necessary to ask about the exact nature of the manipulation of the animals by these animal-shamans.

8. The Desana, like many other indigenous groups, mark the different phases or states of human development (birth, puberty, death) with particular ceremonies. These rites, which express the corporeal and spiritual transformation of the individual, comprise a certain number of dietary and activity restrictions. The nonobservance of the alimentary restrictions (consumption of "dangerous" food during a "bad" period, or food insufficiently purified by the shaman) is supposed to provoke (in the consumer, as well as in certain persons who are directly affiliated to him such as parents or sons) different troubles that vary with the nature of the food item ingested: digestive problems, sores, consumptive illness, etc. For the Desana, see Buchillet (1983); for the Barasana, Taiwano, and other Tukanoan groups, see T. Langdon (1975) and S. Hugh-Jones (1979).

9. Protective incantations that aim to guard the biological family during

periods of crisis or to protect the local group during rituals are recited over tree resin or cigars. In the food decontamination rite that marks the end of dietary and activity restrictions characteristic of these periods, incantations are recited over a sample of food (fish, meat).

10. Coca is the only stimulant with tobacco used by the Desana *kūbū* in order to effect a cure. Coca has several functions: consumed in a regular manner, it reinforces physical endurance and it diminishes hunger; it increases concentration for the *kūbū* and reinforces the acuity of his thought and memory. When not taking the hallucinogenic *paricá*, the *kūbū* often have difficulties in establishing the diagnosis of a sickness. They declare themselves "incapable of seeing the illness in the body of the ill person," a capacity strictly associated in the Desana conception with the intake of hallucinogens.

11. The *kūbū* breathes the incantation over the opening of the gourd or over the plant either at the end of each sequence or at the end of the entire text of the incantation.

12. A difficult labor includes: "wrong position of the infant, "impossibility to be delivered" (the woman feeling the pains without succeeding in expelling the infant), or difficulty in rejecting the placenta. These are attributed to the act of a sorcerer or to an individual fault of the mother or her husband.

13. The barks that contain tannins are hence chosen for their astringent and healing properties.

14. See the analysis of the chant in Lévi-Strauss (1958).

15. In order to hide a sore the *kūbū* invokes the plants with a "black body." Because of the dark color of the Indian's skin, the *kūbū* will always opt for animals and plants with black bodies. If the person to be treated is a white he will invoke the whitish plants.

16. See "synecdoque de la partie" in Fontanier (1968).

17. The repetition can operate on two levels, joining the particular words—names of animals, of spirits, of plants, and of action verbs—or the entire text of the incantation. The repetition confers more force to words, it makes them act more rapidly on the sickness. The frequent usage in the incantation of the synecdoche by referring to the pathogenic object in its whole adds to the redundant character of the incantation.

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