

NON-HUMANS IN AMERINDIAN SOUTH AMERICA

Ethnographies of Indigenous Cosmologies, Rituals and Songs

Edited by

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Marking Out the Bounds of Humanity in Tsachila Ritual

Montserrat Ventura i Oller

Reflection on humanity has developed strongly in the last two decades, driven by Melanesian and Amazonian anthropology (Vilaça 2011). In the case of Amazonia, this impetus derived from a proliferation of ethnographies focusing on the construction of the person, which in turn was sparked, among other factors, by the findings of Seeger, da Matta and Viveiros de Castro (1979: 3): namely that the originality of the Brazilian indigenous societies lies in a particularly rich elaboration of the notion of person, with special reference to corporality as a local symbolic language. This emphasis has inspired studies on the concept of humanity in other parts of the Americas – in the Andean area (Platt 2001, 2009; Rivera Andía 2005; Carlos Ríos 2015), the Mesoamerican area (Galinier 1997; Gutiérrez Estévez 2010; Martínez González 2010; Pitarch 2011), and the Pacific coast area (Praet 2009a and 2009b; Ventura i Oller 2009), among others – which point to the heuristic richness of the body as a way to understand the human being and its limits. The Tsachila ethnology of western Ecuador and, in particular, the analysis of one of its curing and identifying rituals, offers up a case study that can help us to achieve such an aim.

Tsachila Humanity and Its Limits

The Tsachila people inhabit the western side of Ecuador (Santo Domingo de los Tsachila, the western lowlands, the coast of Ecuador), and could be situated at a halfway point (Ventura i Oller

2009)¹ between the highlands and the lowlands, not only geographically but also between ways of organizing subsistence and experience. They consist of around two thousand people spread over seven communes interspersed between rural estates, which are owned by non-indigenous people, and today they live by cultivating bananas, and to a lesser extent cocoa, coffee and pineapples, for domestic consumption. They maintain a relative degree of internal equality, and although the shamans have *de facto* power, they are formally governed by communal councils, elected annually, and a governor who unites the ethnic group, elected every four years. The ethnic statutes (indigenous regulations) promote ethnic endogamy and make it difficult for non-Tsachila to reside in the communes, as well as exerting some control over the conservative rules and practices of tradition. Although a considerable number of commune members declare themselves to be Catholic and others – fewer in number – Evangelical, the practice of these religions is scarce, serving as a complement to the spiritual life of the community and to their fairly frequent recourse to their own shamans and, to a lesser extent, those of other cultural traditions: Andean, Amazonian and Coastal indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian and mestizos. In turn, the shamans carry on the local tradition of completing their apprenticeship with shamans from the outside: from Amazonia, the Andes, the coastal area or beyond the state borders. Most families still pass on to their offspring a position in the world that gives validity to their traditional cosmological universe. Although there is bilingual education, it is of limited success and the vast majority of the population do not reach secondary school, let alone university. Modernity is embodied in some habits of the younger generation, basically at the level of choice of clothing and the use of mobile phones and television, computers and the internet (to a much lesser extent), and the standard musical rhythms of the rural mestizo environment, as well as motorised transport. Some young Tsachila men have relations with young indigenous and non-indigenous women from other regions, but everyday life takes place with few surprises in the communities, in a society that prefers the local ‘good life’ to outside quests for excitement with uncertain results.

In Tsachila cosmology we find a logic of the continuum that is common in societies classified as animist in accordance with the modes of relation and identification proposed by Descola (2005), and in which humans are fated to strive permanently to identify themselves as such and not lose their condition, as noted by Praet (2013) for the Chachi indigenous society, coastal neighbours of the Tsachila.

Here, humanity is shared with other beings – animal, vegetable or spiritual – but with certain nuances. As in some other Amazonian regions, this is a relationship of degree that does not unify the universe of what is human, but rather distributes it in a scale of intensities. In order to explain it, we shall examine the system by which beings are classified, the components of the person, particularly in those attributes that constitute ‘humanity’ from the local point of view, and the forms taken by disease in the areas relevant to this analysis.

The ethnonym Tsachila invokes humanity, but in referential rather than absolute terms: either ‘We-feminine (*chila*) of reference (*tsa*)’ or the more accepted meaning of ‘people (*tsachi*) + the collective (*la*)’, probably a modern contraction of *tsatsachila* (‘people’ of reference).² Its referential capacity is seen in mythology and cosmology, where there are mythical beings (*tsachi kuwenta*, ‘like *tsachi*’) also known as *tsachi* without being members of the human group Tsachila. Likewise, other species designated by the indicator of reference ‘*tsa*’ (*tsakela*, the feline of reference for the jaguar; *tsapini*, the snake of reference for the *Bothrox atrox*, the most venomous one; *tsa ano*, the banana of reference for Dominican banana, *Musa paradisiaca*,³ the most common one) become the prototype, the universal concept of the species, the sum of the attributes of the species, considered distinctive par excellence. For this reason, human beings are Tsachila even if they belong to another ethnic group, and it is the context that allows us to know which *tsachi* is being referred to.

Plants (*tape*) have a very precise category, currently well activated by shamanic healing, that does not cover all the plant kingdom. The latter is also populated by trees (*chide*), some of whose constituents are sometimes highlighted according to the purpose of their mention or use: vines (*sili*), flowers (*luli*), leaves (*japisu*). Nor is there a single term for animals as a group, with these being generically named using the designation *animalila* of Spanish origin. Although there are clear categories for birds (*pichu*) and fish (*watsa*), none of these categories are designated with the prefix *tsa*, ‘of reference’. However we do find this prefix used for more restricted categories, similar to the families or the suborders of the Linnaean taxonomies, such as the felines (*kela*: *tsakela*) or snakes (*pini*: *tsapini*) mentioned above, and even in the case of fish (*tsawatsa*, but also *tsakere*, where *kere* is one of the most common fish: ‘*campeche*’ in Spanish); but it does not appear in all the categories, as for example in the case of worms (*koro*: *chinikoro*, a hairy worm, with two heads; *otonkoro*, a small worm that lives in dry wood and in the intestines – a protagonist in certain myths).

Among the beings that belong to categories with which humans interact, other generic beings are also found, such as the *oko* (incorporeal beings), beings with a marked individual identity (*luban oko*, the red spirit; *son pura*), and the rest of the *ayan* (mothers, elderly women) of some animal species, such as *kela ayan* (mother of the tiger) or of the cosmos (*tsabo ayan*, mother of the stars; or *to ayan*, the mother of the Earth).

Tsachila is thus not the only referent in the world but rather the measure of many relationships. It is, in effect, a relational humanity, not a substantive one, also visible in the system of transformations of mythology, which we cannot cover in detail here (Ventura i Oller 2009 and 2012), and in other social areas, such as the field of disease (Ventura i Oller 2009 and 2011b), explored below.

The Attributes of Humanity

The Tsachila express 'thought' through the heart, as occurs among other Amerindian groups (Surrallés 2003). All humans are endowed with *tenka* in terms of heart, thorax and physical body, but also in terms of the ability to think: *tenka iton* (he has no *tenka*) = stupid, *tenka pun* = intelligent, and in terms of ability to act and to react (in the sense of soul and mobility). Lastly, *tenka* can also be conceived as a capacity to produce emotions (a certain number of expressions that refer to emotivity are formed from the root *ten*). In fact, *tenka* refers directly to the visible and tangible body organ, since all animals that possess it correspond exactly to those that are endowed with a thoracic cavity, such as mammals and birds, but also with a life pulse, such as fish and reptiles. The characters that interact with humans – of which the most frequent in mythology are the spirits, the mammals and the birds – also include snakes, especially *tsapini*, which also appear as the interlocutors of humans in the myths, and which even represent helper spirits for some shamans, able to communicate. They are, in some way, endowed with the capacity for reasoning: an ability to react to events and to intersubjective relationships in an elementary interaction (a snake that crosses paths with a human gives him or her a fixed stare and then flees). From a certain perspective, any demonstration of a being's instinct for survival is attributed to its *tenka*, and in this sense the treatment is the same for humans (men and women) and for animals. The plant world, especially big trees, also have *tenka* by virtue of having the responses needed to ensure their survival in their environment. The simple capacity of moving is

enough to characterize *tenka*, as shown by the attribution of *tenka* to *ayan* (the mother of the Earth), an entity that lives beneath the ground and whose sole known activity is to move slightly from time to time, thereby causing earth tremors or earthquakes. In some way, this shared *tenka* varies in terms of scope and attributions, depending on the being presenting it.

One of the meanings of *tenka* is superimposed on that of *silon* (life force, life itself). The *silon* of a deceased individual can return among the living in the form of an animal like the agouti (*Dasyprocta fuliginosa*), and its condition is discovered as a result of its human habits, such as coming close to the house, but also by its insipid taste when cooked and eaten. Unlike *tenka*, the *silon* is exclusive to humans and certain animals: big trees do not possess it. Those who have the strongest *silon* are the shamans, who acquire it as a result of their ability to travel to the sun.

If *tenka*, together with *silon*, brings wisdom, intelligence, awareness and the instinct for survival, *mowin* is the ability to communicate and strength, specifically the strength of attraction: *mowin* derives from *mo* (desire) and *win* (from *wino*, enter), and the best-known *mowin* is that of hunters and lovers, with their need to attract. However, once again this element is not exclusive to humans. The *mowin* of big trees was in olden times one of the beings feared in every excursion to the forest. *Mowin* is described as an incorporeal and ethereal force, yet one that can appear in the shape of a person when it makes itself visible. It is different to the *oko* (spirits), authentic beings without flesh but with a strong identity. *Mowin*, in contrast, is a force inherent to a being, whether human, animal, plant or spirit, which has the possibility of wandering in search of a new being when the one housing it dies or is no longer available, but which has no independent life. Rather than merely marking the identity of individuals, the *mowin*, as a constitutional part of the person, offers a possibility of a relationship between different individuals from the same category or from different categories, and is thus an element that allows a person to participate in social life in the broadest sense, including relationships both with the Tsachila and with individuals from other species. To this should also be added the talent for seeding, the *sen tede*, equivalent to luck (*suman*) for fishing and hunting. The latter can also be activated by means of the shaman's charms or by certain herbs that also act to counteract bad luck (*pola*) for the hunt (for the hunters, for the hunting hounds). However, the *suman* is not shared by non-humans, except for those that collaborate in the productive activities – hounds in the hunt; Biali, a mythical being, in fishing.

Lastly, the body, *puka*, is the most visible element, and a person is not considered as such until the moment at which the body is completely formed, becoming *tsachi puka*. *Puka* refers directly to completeness: the same term is used to name fruit, and the suffix *ka* is used for everything that is rounded and complete. Nonetheless, the body cannot be considered a simple container for the things that make up a person. It has a primary function, in a cosmological sense as well as an individual and social one. In Tsachila mythology, particularly in the transformational myths, animals and spirits group together into families, cooking and hunting just like humans. When they appear before humans in human form (*tsachi kuwenta*, like *tsachi*), they behave like humans until their identity is discovered from clues such as the way they walk or hunt, or their culinary tastes. Yet, as Descola (1986: 120) points out: 'The common referent for all the beings in nature is not man as a species, but rather humanity as a condition'. These 'characters' externalise a human social behaviour, yet they are not humans. Their difference reveals itself, not in their bodily appearance, but rather via what Viveiros de Castro (1996: 128) calls 'habitus', and Descola calls 'essence', and which can be summarised as being an affective disposition rooted in the body that determines a way of behaving. Non-humans share some human attributes, such as the ability to communicate and live in society, but the Tsachila strive to reveal their true identity and highlight the difference with body markings. The Tsachila myths teach us how they are deceived in this effort by handsome fellows or beautiful seductive women. Sometimes, as a result of these deceptions, there are sexual relations and sometimes offspring. This offspring is human, just as the appearance, the form and the relationship were human. But its humanity is diluted precisely when the transformation, experienced as a deception, is discovered (Ventura i Oller 2008). The fidelity that the Tsachila attach to facts (Ventura i Oller 2002) leads us to another snapshot of this fluid universe, in which progenitors cease to occupy the place whose nature they have usurped, and their offspring, always reluctant to stay among the humanity of reference, flees with its external parent while losing the bodily distinction of the human progenitor. The human condition is lost as a logical consequence of the discovery of the deception (the transformation, the human appearance, the seduction as a Tsachila), something that the Tsachila moral code and their standards of good conduct do not allow. And this condition is made visible on the body.

Forms of Ailments and Evils

The fluidity of the body, corroborated by the possibilities for transformation of the beings in the mythical world, is also revealed in the local conception of illness. Thus, far from producing insensitive people, Tsachila cosmology experiences pain and suffering as something that is fundamentally corporeal. In general, in its generic sense, illness is caused by external agents, and is only rarely explained in terms of a deterioration associated with the passage of time. Until the preceding generation the Tsachila shamans would extract it from the body in the form of a material substance such as a dart, a small stone or a worm, as occurs in a large number of the Upper Amazonian societies (Chaumeil 1983). The wounding object was shown after the curing session as the physical evil that had been running through the body during the suffering. The body was therefore conceived not only as an external appearance that marked a prime human essence, but also as the receptacle that contained the feelings (absent in spirits), and which marked the difference between a living Tsachila and a dead one, or between a complete Tsachila and a spirit. For this reason, humans should take care of their body and protect it. Nowadays, shamanic cures are no longer based on this visible removal, and the illness is eliminated by means of an external cleansing of the body with egg, in line with a curative tradition widespread throughout Indigenous America, most likely of Hispanic origin but with different functions to those of the Iberian Peninsula (Foster 1980: 134–35). Such cleansings are common in the medical practices of indigenous societies that have suffered the colonial onslaught most persistently, such as the Mesoamericans and the Andeans, but also in the so-called ‘frontier of colonisation’ societies in the lowlands. Apart from local peculiarities, the basis of cleansing with egg is the rubbing of the patient’s body, carried out by the specialist, with one or two eggs, which absorb the impurities of the patient and are then thrown into the river or in an inconspicuous place in order to prevent the harm from returning to humans: to the patient, to the shaman or to family members. Today’s Tsachila ritual is hence nuanced by all the incorporations arising from their active participation in a network of shamanic exchanges that link them to coastal, Andean and Amazonian societies, and which spread across national borders (Ventura i Oller 2003, 2011b). Nonetheless, illness is still perceived as the result of an external agent, as something external that needs to be expelled from the body.

When the shamans begin a curing session, they first of all seek to diagnose the etiology of the evil with the aid of their helper spirits. By the same logic of transformations in the world of myths, bodiless beings take on physical and corporeal appearances when they appear in the shamans' visions induced during the learning process, and in the most important rituals, by means of the hallucinogen *nepi* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*). The traditional mythological narrations speak of visions of jaguars, just as the elderly recall the constant fear of the threat posed by this big feline in the everyday life of their youth. Nowadays the jungle has receded to the minimum in an environment punished by the activities of mestizo colonists – tree felling, large-scale agriculture and the pollution of rivers – and with it have disappeared most of the large mammals that featured in the myths and visions. Nonetheless, illness still takes on domestic and often ambivalent forms in the surrounding social universe.

In the etiology of ailments, *luban oko* (red spirit), an avid blood-sucker that lies in wait for hunters, the hunters' prey and everything that runs the risk of having a wound, as well as women menstruating or in childbirth, is the *seiton oko* (evil spirit) most present in the everyday life of the Tsachila, and it takes the form of a known person, sometimes already deceased, or of a specific animal. Agustín, a now elderly shaman, describes a *luban oko* thus:

In another time in Cóngoma there were many *luban oko* ..., which took the form of parrots, of turkeys, screeching like the agouti in the night. ... *Luban oko* never leaves more than two or three footprints, then they disappear. ... *Luban oko* walked like people, like an agouti, like a horse, shouted like people, whistled, played the flute, sometimes climbed trees, like pambil leaves, like that, making noise, hacking at the trees ... never left anything alone. (Ventura i Oller 2009: 166)

Although it can appear in a variety of forms, one of the features that identifies *luban oko* is that it disappears as soon as it is in reach of humans. Apart from its frequent appearances, when it has access to blood from a body, it proceeds to suck it, causing its victims to become thinner and thinner until they die. Burning chili or colonies of termites, and chewing ginger are three of the most commonly used remedies for keeping *luban oko* away from places belonging to humans, such as the home or the bends in the river that the families have domesticated.

Seiton oko, the generic evil spirit, grabs people, hits them and kills them, and also produces the evil air, although with the decline of the jungle, it is hardly ever encountered nowadays. The elderly

Tsachila say that in the past *seiton oko* walked around in the shape of a peccary (*Pecari tajacu*), or a coati (*Nasua nasua*).

Among the beings that now only exist in myths are *Isowe*, the one which has its mouth at the back of its head, or *Sonpura*, with the appearance of a snake, living in the lakes (*wa pilu*), taking the place of the tree *pechi* when it rots, after being felled. It is considered as the *tenka* of this tree, its heart, and as a highly malevolent force (*seiton mowin*) that persecutes the Tsachila when they cut down the tree. According to some, its activity even goes so far as to provoke the growling of *to ayan*, the mother of the Earth.

The curse, the formula par excellence of the shamanic illness, is known as *yuka kika* (doing evil) or *yuka kika kiyán*. *Yuka* is a term steeped in the Christian tradition, which appears to have used it as a convenient expression for translating the notion of the devil. Augusto describes it thus:

Yukan is like the *diablo* [he uses the Spanish word for devil in his discourse in Tsafiki] ... it was very ugly, like black with horns, with a tail, like a dog with a tail, but like a Tsachi himself, but like black. *Yukan* is like that. That's what they say. There are a lot of them. (Ventura i Oller 2009: 182-183)

Leaving aside the contemporary existence of this being, which is not the subject of particular mythic narrations, the term *yuka* is usually used as an adjective to indicate something harmful, as in *yuka ofo* (lit.: 'bad flu') to describe pneumonia, or in *yuka bichi* (lit.: 'bad plague') for one of the expressions describing leishmaniasis. However, the *yuka* of the curses, certainly harmful, does not resemble the idea of an evil spirit like *luban oko* or other *seiton oko*. *Yuka kiyán* is an illness produced by an evil, sent by an enemy, and renewed in an object (admittedly, an object that the evil spirits or enemy spirits have helped to send).

Suyun kiyán, the rainbow disease, as in other regions of the lowlands and of the Andes (Kroeger and Barbira-Freedman 1992: 128, 210; Sánchez-Parga and Pineda 1985: 546), is the origin of many disorders, above all those affecting the skin. *Suyun*, as in the case of *Salun* (in some narratives named without distinction as if dealing with the same character), appears to human eyes as a handsome young man who seduces women, penetrates them and kills them during coitus (Ventura i Oller 2011a).

Among the complaints whose origin is associated with 'the whites', there are the *susto* (*wepana kika*), the evil air (*seiton wu kika*), or the evil eye (*kaka kika*), usually considered by ethnomedicine as popular

diseases of Hispanic origin (Foster 1980) but rooted in indigenous traditions. They have a disembodied form, but the shamans (*ponela*) see them 'as Tsachi' during their shamanic journeys.

It is in the modern-day diseases considered *feto kiyán*, diseases of the whites, sometimes also *diochi kiyán*, diseases from God – as opposed to the local ones, which include the curse as a central cause – that we observe a variation in appearance, in many respects symptomatic of the everyday social situation. In the repertoire of Isidro, one of the young shamans with whom I worked, every disease occurs under a different human form. Thus, influenza (*ofó*) is transmitted by a mestizo trader of the *pitsa* fruit (*inga*) via the pods of the same fruit that he sells. Chicken pox is, in turn, caused by ingestion of corn on the cob served by a native merchant from Latacunga (Andes). Rubella is transmitted by an indigenous Andean vendor of *colitas* (cool drinks); dysentery by a mestizo merchant from the sierra selling bread rolls; avian flu by a small spirit with an insatiable desire for eating chicken. In contrast to the latter illnesses, *chiyaku*, tetanus, is not a disease from God but rather a disease caused by an evil spirit (*seiton oko*). This evil spirit is described as a disembodied mass that inhabits some trees of the forest, which the shamans see in the form of *du tsachi* (people of the sierra). *Chiyaku* penetrates the body in the form of a powder, so it is easier to get it when you have an injury. The (anti-tetanus) 'inyección' raises a barrier so that the disease does not penetrate. This is a logic that is repeated in other rituals which reveal the vulnerability of the body and the need to protect it, as we shall see further below.

The logic of transformation pertaining to the mythical world thus appears in the field of disease with the strength and diversity of the social imaginary. The evils are wrapped in the social bodies of the environment, both human and non-human, and mark them.

Marking Out Humanity in Ritual

Given the fragility of the body's 'casing' and the ease in passing from one bodily appearance to another in mythology and the Tsachila conception of the person, the limits of humanity are particularly vulnerable for this group. In fact, as we have shown, in Tsachila mythology the body is not an identity marker that would by itself distinguish humans from other beings, or humans from other humans; and since the body is not enough to establish a differential human identity, the Tsachila have a ritual to reaffirm the latter by strengthening it, *Patso kika* (making *patso*, 'shielding oneself').

The expression *Patso kika* (Ventura i Oller 2006) refers to a collective curing ritual, and although it is in decline like the rest of the traditional collective rituals, it is still practised in certain homes. Its objective is to cover the body with a sort of 'barrier' or 'protective shell' once cleared of any 'dirt' or foreign element caused by an 'evil' spirit. The households participating in the ritual, united by ties of kinship or neighbourhood, are joint victims of the same ailment, although the symptoms are not experienced by all of their members equally. This is in line with the indigenous concept of disease (here indeed, largely coinciding with that of so many other indigenous groups in the region), which goes beyond the physical experience of evil in a particular body to influence the collective imbalances that the cure – also collective – will attempt to amend. The 'barrier' succeeds in 'deceiving' the spirits, which otherwise, due to this ontological continuity between humans and the non-human that they are part of, have a tendency to incorporate, ignorant of the weakness of the body's casing in setting the limits of identity.

The ritual lasts two hours and usually involves at least one extensive family. And since illnesses are perceived as afflictions of the group, the remedies prescribed by the shamans, especially sex and food diets, concern the whole family, even when the illness directly affects only one of its members. Thus, besides individual cleansings, in this case with egg, the central moment of the celebration takes place when the shaman prepares a magic dye, made with *mali* (*Genipa americana*), rubber and *nepi* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the men and women, separately, paint each other's bodies with black horizontal strokes. At the end of the second night, they go together to the river to take the ritual bath, rubbing themselves with a mixture of plants previously purified by the shaman. Lastly, they paint the palms of their hands with *mu* (*Bixa orellana*) and show them, in a sort of brief greeting, towards the east and west. Today, this ritual is not accompanied by words or songs, except for the litany chanted by the shaman when he invokes his helper spirits under the influence of the hallucinogenic *nepi*. More than a chant, this litany is a call to certain non-human beings to come and help to expel the evil. If the *Patso kika* ritual as a whole appears as an extreme expression of the Tsachila conception of health and disease, its practice allows us to see, in an explicit demonstration – the black strokes on the body – how the body acts as a weak material frontier: a fragile wrapping that humans themselves must occasionally fortify with this extra barrier provided by the *mali* and the *mu*. It would seem that in traditional society, the *Patso kika* allowed the Tsachila to mark out the limits of

the human body in the face of those supernatural beings who did not have it: a sort of casing erected to mark and reinforce this difference between them and the other, non-corporeal, beings; a physical mark of their human identity.

The *Patso kika* ritual would thus be a demonstration of the effort that humans should make in order to remain fully human, and unsoiled by any foreign element. This is the same effort that anthropology has described vigorously since the 1980s, referring to body marking as a social marking (Turner 1995), an ontogenetic (Erikson 1996) or communicative marking (Déléage 2007; see also Taylor 2003), and an ethnic marking (Vidal 1992). *Patso kika* succeeds in distinguishing Tsachila humanity in the face of spirits and also, as the reference for humanity, from the other humans they need to stand out from, particularly the other neighbouring indigenous groups (Chachi), the Afro-Ecuadorians and the mestizo population. This distinction is achieved by emphasising their most visible external feature: the black strokes on the skin, which constitutes at the same time their 'traditional' ethnic appearance. Let us examine it.

Marking Out Frontiers in Order to Survive

The shamans have almost abandoned the celebration of *Patso kika*, at least over the last two decades. This is the period in which perhaps the most important transformations in the Tsachila's daily life have taken place. The forest and its prey have virtually disappeared, social organisation has undergone a profound transformation, the shamans have lost their political power, biomedicine has steadily been introduced – within the limitations of its precarious implementation in the region – and the Evangelist pastors and Catholic priests have continued their unremitting task of colonising Tsachila mentalities. Even so, these changes have not brought an improvement in the Tsachila's quality of life. Their economy is more dependent on the market and their diet is less diverse. They continue to suffer from diseases, with a degree of anxiety added by the fact that their shamans feel that they have lost their healing powers, while the possibility of accessing Western health care is still distant, both economically and geographically. In addition, many of the implications of this Western medicine come into contradiction with the Tsachila's notion of disease – especially when it is produced by a curse – and it thus becomes useless for solving most of their ailments, while medical interference in their bodies, such as the removal of organs or other

types of direct mediation such as injections, are seen to be, if not dangerous, at least suspicious. Physical evils and social evils are too common, the shamanic cleansings are becoming too much of an everyday thing to be effective in persistent cases, and the *Patso kika* appears to solve this need for concentrating the traditional healing forces more successfully.

At the same time, from the point of view of their collective identity within the framework of Ecuadorian national society, the Tsachila find themselves at a particularly difficult moment, and are trying in some areas to reinforce some of their external ethnic marks in order to find a place in a society that demands differentiating exotic markers from them, while they attempt at the same time to adapt to the new forms of social organisation that this same society imposes on them. Whether by chance or within the same logic being described here, traditional ethnic attire also used to include body painting based on horizontal black bars – in this case drawn only with the tincture of the *mali* – on bodies smeared with red colouring, along with the cotton cloth with which men and women covered their genitals. These paintings offered the Tsachila the same external appearance as that achieved by the ritualised covering of their bodies practised during the *Patso kika*. One identifies them ethnically, the other as human beings. It is in this context that the Tsachila have, in the last couple of decades, readopted the *Patso kika* ritual. This return should thus be regarded as an effort to redefine their identity, not only in its primary sense of protecting themselves from the attacks of diseases, but also with the inexplicit but clear aim of rediscovering and redesigning the place of their bodies in this new society: one increasingly bereft of those supernatural beings that once made up the Tsachila's cosmology and were both a complement and a mirror to their identity. In a context where society is as yet unable to provide satisfactory answers to the problems it causes to its members, the ultimate goal with this effort is therefore to feel at ease with their whole persona.

We have noted that, for the Tsachila, being human is not a property of a particular species. Just like in other Amerindian animist societies, it is a 'relative position', given that any other being 'can become human when it is perceived as a congener, as a member of the species' (Taylor 2006: 71). As suggested by Praet (2013), this would appear to be a conception of humanity that forces humans to strive constantly to continue being human.

In Tsachila cosmology and mythology, in their conception of illness and in their ritual, the body is not sufficient for indicating human identity or social identity. The body is not marked out for the

benefit of human Tsachila but for non-human ones (in the *Patso kika* ritual) or for non-Tsachila (in the ethnic clothing). Body marking is not purely aesthetic or a constituent part of a person in constant formation – as also pointed out by Erikson (1996), referring to the Matis of Amazonia. It is circumstantial but recurrent, and therefore ritualised. It could be an attempt to update an ancient categorisation system, or a local variant of a body-marking practice that is present in other parts of the region. In the case being studied, painting markers of humanity on the body in daily social life and in ritual helps to define and reinforce the group, and shows us that the ontological continuity between humans and non-humans is an uncomfortable initial premise that these societies have to struggle with in order to survive.

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Notes

1. The ethnographic data come from ethnographic fieldwork conducted with the Tsachila people over several years between 1991 and 2016, especially in the commune of Cóngoma and, to a lesser extent, in Naranjos and Chigüilpe. I would like to give my sincere thanks to a large number of Tsachila men and women for their collaboration at every stage of this research work. I would also like to thank the HUMANT project (HAR2013-40445-P) of the UAB's AHCISP research group for its support.
2. C.S. Dickinson: personal communication.

3. It is the most common variety nowadays, found widely in Ecuador, although it comes originally from Africa.

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