

Bundles, Stampers, and Flying Gringos: Native Perceptions of Capitalist Violence in Peruvian Amazonia

By

Fernando Santos-Granero

SMITHSONIAN TROPICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Frederica Barclay

PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DEL PERÚ

R E S U M E N

En este artículo examinamos una serie de historias que han aparecido entre los Awajún, Wampis y Ashaninka de la amazonía peruana, protagonizadas por una diversidad de seres sobrenaturales blancos que deambulan por sus comunidades para robarles su fuerza vital o introducir en sus cuerpos sustancias patógenas. Proponemos que estas historias constituyen una respuesta a la violencia capitalista que actualmente experimentan estos pueblos como resultado de las agresivas políticas gubernamentales de estímulo a la inversión privada y de las intensas actividades de exploración por parte de corporaciones extractivas ávidas de beneficiarse con los recursos naturales de la región. Estas historias están basadas en nociones indígenas sobre la persona y la enfermedad, pero también en eco-cosmologías nativas que consideran la vida como un recurso escaso, objeto de una intensa competición entre especies. Lo que distingue a ésta de pasadas coyunturas de depredación por parte de gente blanca es que en esta ocasión los indígenas amazónicos sienten que el gobierno y sus aliados se han propuesto acabar con ellos de una vez por todas. [Amazonía, cosmologías, ontologías, percepciones indígenas, violencia capitalista]

A B S T R A C T

This article examines a set of stories told among the Awajun, Wampis, and Ashaninka of eastern Peru, which feature a diversity of white supernatural beings that wander about their communities to steal their vital force, or introduce harmful substances into their

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bodies. These stories constitute a response to the capitalist violence experienced at present by these peoples as a result of hard-line government policies promoting private investment, and the frenzied activities of extractive corporations eager to profit from the region's natural resources. Such stories are informed by indigenous notions about personhood and illness, but also by native eco-cosmologies that view life as a scarce resource—the object of intense interspecific competition. What distinguishes this from past junctures of predation by white people is that on this occasion native Amazonians feel that the government and its allies have set out to exterminate them once and for all. [Amazonia, capitalist violence, cosmologies, indigenous perceptions; ontologies]

ON JUNE 5, 2009, THE PERUVIAN GOVERNMENT ORDERED THE removal of the Awajun and Wampis protesters who were blocking the Fernando Belaúnde Terry road, near the town of Bagua. In the context of a regional strike begun on April 9, protesters demanded the repeal of 11 legislative decrees that created the conditions for the despoiling of their lands and natural resources by large extractive corporations. Close to seven hundred members of the elite police force using armored vehicles and helicopters, and armed with assault rifles and tear gas, attacked protesters equipped with spears and rocks. Thirty-three persons died in the confrontations, including 9 of the 38 policemen taken as hostages by protesters in Station No. 6 of PerúPetro, the state oil company. It is estimated that around two hundred civilians were wounded by police shots. What came to be known as the “Bagua massacre” marked a critical point in the struggle of native Amazonian peoples against multiple aggressions by the government of President Alan García (2006–11). It also confirmed the extended indigenous perception that white people, represented by the Peruvian State in alliance with large extractive corporations, were set on exterminating them.

Numerous works have been published in the past decade documenting the social, economic, and environmental impacts that extractive activities have had on the territories of the indigenous peoples of Peruvian Amazonia, as well as the response of these peoples in the face of such processes (Dandler 1998; La Torre López 1998; DGE 2007; EarthRights International et al. 2007; Napolitano 2007). This article will explore another dimension of the consequences that the market economy's unbridled expansion has had over native Amazonian peoples, namely, how these peoples perceive the advance and pressures of the new extractive fronts. The main argument here is that the indigenous peoples of the region perceive such pressures as a deliberate attempt by the State and the extractive companies to eliminate them both as individuals and as social groups. In the case of the Awajun,

Wampis, and Ashaninka—the focus of this work—these fears are expressed in the appearance of a number of stories about the activities of several supernatural beings with white physiognomies, who wander about native communities equipped with strange contraptions that make them invulnerable and allow them to spy on and attack (more or less covertly) its members.

According to these stories, which began to circulate at the end of 2008 and were still circulating in 2010 when this article was approved for publication, these beings—known variously as bundles (*bultos*), stampers (*selladores*), and flying gringos (*gringos voladores*)—threaten the security of native communities, infiltrating them through governmental agencies and programs, killing their members for a diversity of purposes. These perceptions, and the fears they entail, derive from a widespread set of native notions about personhood, illness, the “perspectival” nature of the world, and the competitive character of relations between species, who are perceived to be engaged in a permanent competition for vital forces. As Santos-Granero (2009) has argued, these indigenous cosmologies provide the basis for what he calls the Amerindian “political economies of life.” According to these cosmologies, the vital force that animates the world—variously identified with the sun’s energy, the soul of the creator God, or a generic vital substance—is finite, generally fixed, scarce, in constant circulation, and unequally distributed. Even when vital forces are not considered to be finite and scarce, they are felt to be badly distributed and not equally available to all. Given that this substance animates all living beings, not only animals, plants, and humans, but also a large number of objects and spirits, and given that it is generally scarce, the increase of a certain species, or category of living being, can only be attained at the expense of the decrease of another. This means that all living beings are engaged in a fierce struggle to accumulate as much vital force as possible in order to guarantee their survival and reproduction.

In “perspectival” terms, such competition is conceived of as a struggle between hunters and prey, and each species sees itself as predator of some species and prey of others (Stolze Lima 1996, 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; Belaúnde 2007). According to this conception of the world, in the mythical past all living beings—including objects—were human, immortal, and lived in harmony. Owing to the fallibility of primordial humans, or of the Gods that created them, at a certain point some humans were transformed into the animals, plants, objects, and spirits that exist today, whereas others retained their humanity—now mortal—and became the different types of peoples that exist at present. Native Amazonian peoples assert that all living beings have a human-shaped soul that recalls their past human condition and for this reason they are considered to be “persons.” All these beings see themselves as human, while they regard other beings as their structural opposites. In such perspectival cosmologies, competition for life forces is expressed as a

struggle between human/hunters and non-human/prey, in which predators hunt and eat their prey, whereas prey take revenge on their enemies by sending disease. What prevents such political economies of life from becoming a Hobbesian “war of all against all” is the notion that all living beings are persons and thus have a right to live, and that all aggressions can and will be responded to with similar or greater aggression. This results in an ethic of self-regulation that ensures a balance among the species despite the practice of generalized predation.

The stories about white—especially gringo—evil beings that have started to circulate among the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis in the context of the rapid expansion of new extractive fronts respond to this particular logic. According to such stories, these supernatural beings attack indigenous people either by introducing foreign substances into their bodies (including the stamping or marking of their bodies), or by extracting bodily substances or body parts (fat, eyes, hearts, and other organs), with the objective of stealing their vital energy or inhibiting their reproductive capacities. Such stories resonate with widespread native Amazonian theories that view disease as the result of the introduction of pathogenic objects or substances into a person’s body, or the extraction of vital substances from them. The circulation of these stories has generated much anxiety among the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis, but also among other native peoples, such as the Shawi (DGE 2010). Such fears have emerged as the result of the State’s granting of concessions for oil exploration and exploitation within indigenous territories without consulting their inhabitants, or their collective organizations. They are sustained by the accelerated changes and pressures that the Awajun, Wampis, and Ashaninka are currently experiencing.

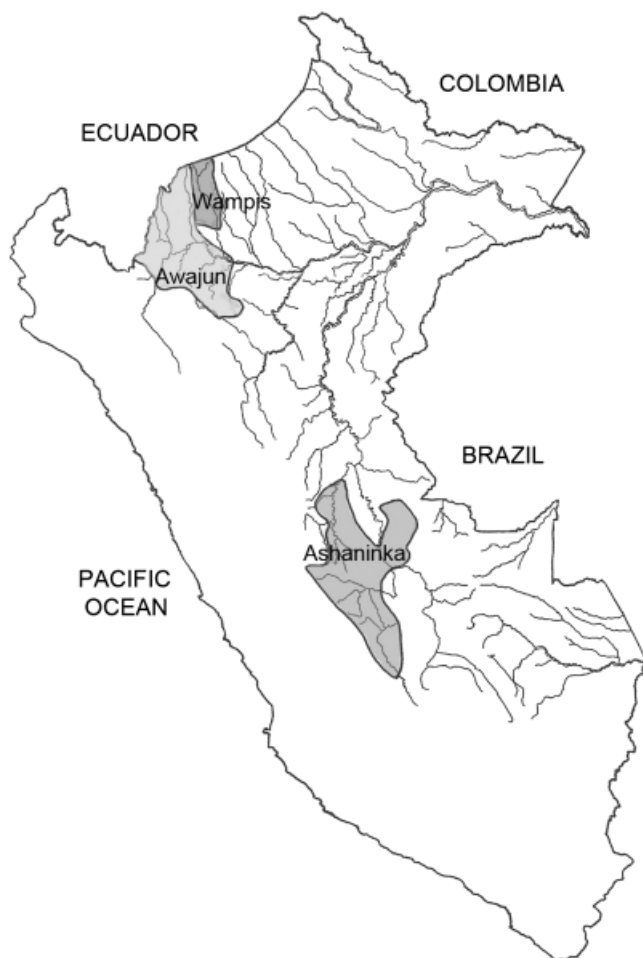
This is not the first time that native Amazonian peoples confront a situation that affects their physical or social integrity as the result of the expansion of extractive activities (OGE 2005). Neither is it the first time that they associate these activities with the appearance of supernatural beings that seek to kill them in this manner. A series of stories about *pishtacos* and *pelacaras*—gringos who kill people to extract their fat or skin for a variety of purposes—circulated throughout Peruvian Amazonia in the 1980s in the context of the aggressive colonization, deforestation, and road-building projects promoted by Presidents Fernando Belaúnde (1980–85) and Alan García (1985–90). The effects of these stories were particularly alarming among the Shipibo, Awajun, Yine, and Yanasha (Roe 1982:90–92; Brown 1986:183; Gow 1991:245; Santos-Granero 1998:137–139).

References to *pishtacos* appeared in the Andean highlands around 1571, when their activities were reported by chronicler Cristóbal de Molina, the Cuzquenian. Some have argued, however, that the origin of this figure can be traced back to the pre-Hispanic *ñaqak*, or “throat cutter,” which in turn would be an avatar of indigenous sorcerers (Ansión and Sifuentes 1989; Bellier and Hocquenghem 1991).

Analysis of the *pishtaco*, its pre-Hispanic roots, and its various metamorphoses throughout time has been undertaken by numerous scholars working mostly in Andean and urban coastal settings (Ansión 1989a; Degregori 1989; Rojas 1989; Rivière 1991; Salazar 1991; Weismantel 1997, 2001; Canessa 2000). Most of these authors agree that these figures represent a radical Other, an “external power, that dominates by force and extracts from Andean people their most valuable possession, their vital force” (Ansión 1989b:9). They evoke the vulnerability of indigenous people, women, and the poor to the “predations of the powerful,” who in colonial and post-colonial Peru are often identified with national, or foreign, whites (Weismantel 2001:xxii). As such, *pishtaco* stories not only constitute a reflection on alterity and its inequalities, but above all on affirmation of the humanness of indigenous people “in an oppressive and racialized world” (Canessa 2000:705).

Today we witness the appearance of new stories, with new settings and characters, that circulate through new means of communication, but which express a similar fear: the fear of white people and their predatory powers. These stories are inscribed within the long-lived *pishtaco* tradition. What seems to distinguish the present situation of generalized predation from that of past times—such as the one that took place in the 1980s—is that this time indigenous peoples are certain that the Peruvian State has allied with large extractive corporations not only to despoil native peoples from their life forces, but to exterminate them.

This article will analyze narratives of white supernatural beings, as they have been reported among the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis, through new understandings of native Amazonian ontologies and cosmologies (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; Santos-Granero 2009). The Arawak-speaking Ashaninka and the Jivaro-speaking Awajun and Wampis are among the most numerous native peoples in the region, with a population of 88,700 and 65,500, respectively (INEI/UNFPA 2010). Although they are separated by thousands of kilometers (see Map 1), they share a similar environment (the forest-covered Andean piedmont) and history (of early colonial contact interspersed with wars of resistance and extended periods of political autonomy). At present, they also share a common affiliation to the Interethnic Association for the Development of Peruvian Amazonia (AIDSEP), Peru’s largest confederation of native Amazonian peoples, and a firm stance against the alien peoples and companies that are despoiling their lands and resources. This work will analyze the Ashaninka and Awajun–Wampis because sightings of white supernatural beings have often been reported among them, and because the authors are well acquainted with their history and present situation. Although such sightings respond to shared eco-cosmological conceptions and have been triggered by the accelerated expansion of extractive activities in Peruvian Amazonia, they have developed independently and, for this reason, differ in form and style.



Map 1 *Awajun, Wampis, and Ashaninka territories in Peruvian Amazonia.*

To understand the context of these sightings, we first discuss the impact of capitalist expansion over the past ten years. The reports of sightings are analyzed next, to identify their common elements. Lastly, views of white people will be examined—represented here by State agents and foreign extractive companies—which we suggest express the competition for life forces characteristic of Amerindian political economies. The general feeling among the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis that the government and the extractive companies have allied to exterminate them is expressed not only in these sightings, but also in a variety of formal documents produced by their ethnopolitical organizations.

The Resurgence of Terror Among the Ashaninka

At the beginning of the century, the Arawak-speaking Ashaninka of the Selva Central region (departments of Pasco and Junín) had been decimated by confrontation with the insurgent forces of the Shining Path (SP) and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), as well as with the counterinsurgent troops that sought to suppress them. Between 1980 and 2000 more than six thousand Ashaninka—including Asheninka and Nomatsiguenga—died as a result of these confrontations (CVR 2003). Additionally, there were approximately 15 thousand Ashaninka displaced from their communities. Instead of supporting them through the Repopulation Program created in 1993 to benefit returning populations, the government privileged Andean colonists, promoting their establishment in areas abandoned by the Ashaninka during the period of violence (Dandler 1998:67).

The government also took advantage of the Ashaninka's displacement to grant hefty concessions to lumber companies in indigenous lands (Peñaherrera 2009). In some areas, such as Atalaya, the struggle between the Ashaninka and the lumber companies supported by the State and local authorities has led to violent confrontations and the prosecution of indigenous leaders (Caruso 2004; Decretos 2006: 22–23). Timber extraction has affected not only Ashaninka communities, but also the protected natural areas that form part of their ancestral territories (El Comercio 2008d).

In remote areas, such as the Apurímac and Ene River Valley (VRAE), the Ashaninka communities have been constantly harassed by Andean colonists, often in association with bands of drug traffickers and the remnants of the SP that protect them. These settlers systematically invade indigenous lands in order to grow coca for the illegal production of cocaine (El Comercio 2008e). As a result, today the VRAE produces 58 percent of the country's cocaine (Páez 2007). The despoiling of Ashaninka lands has been aggravated by the authorities' resistance to title indigenous communities, even those that have been measured and demarcated, as denounced by the Ashaninka Organization of the Apurímac River (OARA) in 2007 (Memorial 2007).

The activities of the VRAE Special Command, created in 2008 to eradicate the narco-terrorist bands operating in the Apurímac valley, led drug traffickers and coca producers to move to more remote areas of the Ene River valley, invading local Ashaninka communities in the process (El Comercio 2008b). In June 2008, the representatives of the Ene River Ashaninka Organization (CARE) denounced the invasion of their communities. At the same time, community leaders signed an agreement to help each other protect their territories and reject the invaders (Salazar 2008b). The confrontation with the drug traffickers and the remaining SP forces revived the Ashaninka self-defense committees, originally created in the

1980s to combat the insurgents, thus increasing the levels of violence and conflict (El Comercio 2009).

The Ashaninka have also been affected by the granting of large oil concessions in areas overlapping their communities and the adjacent protected areas. In 1998, the government granted Blocks 34 and 35 to Spanish Repsol YPF Oil; these blocks are located along the Upper Ucayali River (Anuario 2000:25). In 2003, it granted a new concession, Block 90. At 8,800 km², this block encompassed the old Blocks 34 and 35 and extended to the south toward the Tambo River, which covers the lands of twelve Ashaninka communities, as well as the buffer zone between them and the El Sira Communal Reserve (Oxfam 2007:15). In 2004, the government granted the same company the adjacent Block 57, located along the Tambo and Urubamba Rivers, which affects 14 Ashaninka, Yine, and Matsigenka communities. In addition, in 2005, the government granted Oil Block 108 to Pluspetrol Perú Corporation, a subsidiary of the Argentinean consortium Pluspetrol (Salazar 2008a). This block covers most of the Ene River basin, overlapping with the lands of 18 Ashaninka communities, as well as with the buffer zone of the Ashaninka Communal Reserve.

Ashaninka organizations, such as CARE and the Ashaninka National Union of the Apurimac River (UNAY), have opposed the entry of these oil companies into their communities and have demanded the annulment of the concessions (Servicios en Comunicación Intercultural [SERVINDI] 2006; Salazar 2008a). In June 2007, the Regional Association of Indigenous Peoples (ARPI), which includes 11 indigenous federations of the Selva Central region, rejected the government's anti-Indian attitude, condemned the granting of oil concessions in indigenous territories, and agreed to hinder the entry of oil companies into their communities, or suspend any works that might have started (SERVINDI 2007a). These organizations argue that the government did not consult Ashaninka communities before granting these concessions—which is required according to Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, of which Peru is a signatory (Oxfam 2007). As a result, tensions between the Ashaninka and the oil companies escalated, leading to the invasion of oil camps and the suspension of oil exploration activities at the end of 2007, and again during the first half of 2008 (El Comercio 2007; El Comercio 2008a).

Conflict resulting from the invasion of these land areas by colonists, timber extractors, and oil companies, as well as from President Alan García's overtly anti-Indian policies, has led to the organization of several regional strikes. In August 2008, 128 Ashaninka and Yanasha communities affiliated to UNAY and the Apatyawapa Nampitsi Pichis (ANAP) federation participated in a regional strike, in response to the general mobilization convoked by AIDSESEP (SERVINDI 2008). Protesters demanded the repeal of Decrees 1015 and 1073, which modified the law of private

investment and allowed the sale of communal lands with the vote of only a simple majority of the participants in an unqualified assembly, thus enabling the despoilment of indigenous Amazonian and Andean communities by large corporations. In April 2009, the Indigenous Organization of the Atalaya Region (OIRA) joined the Amazonian strike convoked by AIDSESEP to demand the repeal of Decrees 1020, 1064, 1080, 1081, 1089, and 1090, which created the conditions for this despoilment. They also demanded from the government the recognition of the ancestral collective rights of native Amazonian peoples, and the re-establishment in the country's political constitution of the principles of inalienability, imprescriptibility, and unseizability of indigenous lands (La República 2009; SERVINDI 2009a).

In the meantime, the announcement that Peru and Brazil were planning to build six large hydroelectric plants in Peruvian Amazonia, the most important of which, Pakitzapango, was to be constructed in the Ene River valley, deepened the feeling of encroachment experienced by the Ashaninka (SERVINDI 2009b). In its 23rd Ordinary Congress, held in April 2009, CARE demanded the annulment of the resolution by which the Ministry of Energy and Mining commissioned the company Pakitzapango Energy SAC to undertake a feasibility study for the dam's construction. CARE justified their demands on the basis that the native communities had been neither informed nor consulted on the project, as required by ILO's Convention 169 (Pronunciamiento 2009). The dam would create over 73 thousand hectares of artificial lake, which would affect ten Ashaninka communities and flood thirteen settlements and more than 30 thousand hectares of communal lands (CARE 2009). The River Ene Ashaninka not only rejected construction of the dam, but also denounced government policies, which, from their perspective, constituted an attempt to eradicate native peoples.

The Rupture of the Border Pact with the Awajun–Wampis

Despite being easily accessible from the coast, until the beginning of this century the territories of the Jivaro-speaking Awajun and Wampis—which include portions of the departments of Cajamarca, Amazonas, San Martín, and Loreto—had not experienced such extensive colonization processes as those in other areas of Peruvian Amazonia. This was largely due to the fact that their territories occupy a disputed border area in which, until the signing of the peace treaty between Peru and Ecuador in 1998, there existed a non-written pact of mutual protection between, on the one hand, the Awajun and Wampis and, on the other, the Peruvian Army (ODECOFROC 2010). After the signing of the peace treaty between Peru and Ecuador, and the demarcation of their common frontier, the old alliance between the Awajun–Wampis and the Army started to dissolve, insofar as these peoples were considered to be no longer necessary for the Army's long-term objectives.

The most evident sign of this strategic change was the Army's support for a series of initiatives that put at risk the integrity of the Awajun and Wampis territories and, more particularly, their approval of mining concessions in the Cordillera del Condor, along the border region. These concessions had been approved in 1992, but remained on hold until a few months after the signing of the peace treaty, when the government signed a mining agreement with Ecuador to promote cooperation in the development of mining activities along the border (D.S. 046-1999-RE).

Simultaneously, the government created a Reserved Zone that overlapped with 52 Awajun and Wampis communities of the Condorcanqui province, under the pretext of carrying out a territorial planning program and without consulting the affected communities (D.S. N° 005-99-AG). The objective of this initiative was to determine the route of a series of roads to connect Peru and Ecuador, as well as to demarcate protected natural areas, as established in the 1998 peace agreements. Awajun and Wampis local organizations accepted the idea of creating a protected natural area along the frontier, which would ensure the conservation of the headwaters of the Cenepa and Santiago Rivers, as well as block the development of mining activities in the Cordillera del Condor area. From 1999 to 2004, the Awajun and Wampis participated actively, together with environmental authorities, in the planning process for this zone. This process culminated in a consensual proposal for the creation of a 152,875-hectare national Park at Ichigkat Muja (INRENA 2004). However, in 2005 the government blocked the initiative, reducing the protected area to 69,829 hectares in order to open the region to gold exploration. The Ministry of Defense and the Joint Command of the Peruvian Army, which until then had systematically hindered all plans for colonization of Awajun and Wampis territories, supported the reduction of the park's area and the granting of mining permits (ODECOFROC 2010:32).

The decision to cut down the park, sanctioned in 2007, was considered an affront by the Awajun–Wampis. They denounced the apparent collusion between government authorities, the Army, and the mining companies (ODECOFROC 2008a, b), and accused the Army of allowing the entry of miners without permits into the area, whose operations were already affecting water quality. In addition, the government had not complied with its commitment to expand the territories of ten native communities and title the lands of several others in order to close the park's southern frontier to further colonization (Acta 2004).

This situation worsened when, in December 2006, PerúPetro granted Oil Block 116 to Hocol, a French oil company (PerúPetro 2006). Located to the south of the Cordillera del Condor, the area covers 856,000 hectares and overlaps with almost one hundred Awajun and Wampis communities of the Santiago, Cenepa, Nieva, and Marañon Rivers, at the heart of their ancestral territories. The decision was

immediately condemned by local Awajun and Wampis organizations. The following year, they rejected a meeting organized by the government, arguing that the proposed oil operations “put their lives at risk” (SERVINDI 2007b). This block also overlaps with the Tuntanain Communal Reserve and affects the area set apart for the creation of the Kampankis Communal Reserve. The distress caused by the government’s actions has led to an increase of conflict in the area—a conflict that has deepened as new extractive companies settle in the area and new economic projects are announced. One such project is the construction of the Rentema dam, which would affect the territorial integrity of the Awajun and Wampis peoples (GRA 2008).

In 1998, the lands of the Awajun community of Naranjos—San Ignacio province, department of Cajamarca—were invaded by more than one hundred mestizo colonists (La Revista Agraria 2002). Despite the protests of community members, followed by legal action, local authorities favored the invaders, granting them land titles within the community’s borders. Attempts to eject the invaders failed because of a lack of support from local police and law courts. This led to a violent confrontation when, in January 2002, the Awajun of Flor de la Frontera attacked and evicted the colonists who had settled in their community (Congreso 2002); the communities of this area have been affected by more than 60 concessions granted by the government to the Peruvian mining company Metalfin-Afrodita (ODECO-FROC 2010:16). Local Awajun communities have opposed these and other gold mining concessions granted by the government in the area.

The Awajun and Wampis communities of Datém province, Loreto, have been included (almost in their entirety) in two large oil blocks (Benavides and Soria 2009). Block 109 was granted to the Spanish company Repsol in 2005, and encompasses a total of 23 Awajun communities living along the Potro, Apaga, and Cahuapanas Rivers. Block 147 was granted in 2008 to Jindail Oil and Gas Peru S.A. (a company based in India) in association with Peru’s Enigma Petróleo y Gas (a subsidiary of a company registered in Namibia—now Chariot Oil and Gas); this block encompasses 11 Wampis communities along the Morona River. The government policy of granting oil concessions in indigenous territories has been denounced repeatedly by the Awajun and Wampis organizations affiliated to the Regional Coordination of Indigenous Peoples of the San Lorenzo area (CORPI-San Lorenzo), which have demanded the annulment of all concessions (CNR 2008). In addition, the Organization of the Awajun Peoples of the Manseriche District is demanding compensation from the government for the contamination of the communities’ water source at Apaga River—a result of oil spills that occurred more than ten years ago. The protests have included the occupation of PerúPetro’s Station No. 5 on more than one occasion over the past years and during the 2008 Amazonian strike. The recurring conflicts with the State and large extractive

corporations explain why the Awajun and Wampis communities participated in the April 2009 Amazonian strike, with its tragic outcome of so many dead and wounded.

Indigenous Perceptions of Capitalist Violence

It was in this context of intense aggression by the government and a group of national and transnational corporations dedicated to the extraction of timber, gold, and oil that news first appeared about the presence of white supernatural beings that wandered around native communities harassing the inhabitants. The first of these reports took the form of an e-mail sent on January 6, 2009, by Edinson Espíritu, an Ashaninka from the Perene River to the members of the AMA Bilingual Intercultural Network, a non-profit organization devoted to improving the quality of life of Andean–Amazonian communities (<http://aamapresidente.blogspot.com>). The text of the e-mail, here translated literally from Spanish, said:

Dear friends, brothers, colleagues, comrades, allies and public in general. Yesterday, an Ashaninka sister declared to us that in the Ashaninka territory—selva central, people (gringos) have appeared dressed in trousers, shirts, shoes, helmets and iron wings; the wings help them travel from one place to another; we believe they operate with some sort of fuel; no bullets can enter their clothing; they kill boys and girls without pity to extract only their eyes and hearts; up until now there have already disappeared several Ashaninka boys and girls; for this reason we alert all men and women who are not yet aware of this to remain vigilant. People, in particular Ashaninka who live in dispersed areas distant from towns, please organize and you know what to do.

This was reproduced the following day in the blog of Leonardo Antich, an Awajun from Santiago River (<http://noticiaskanus.blogspot.com>), and on January 29, on the webpage of a conservation newsletter ViajerosOnLine (<http://www.viajerosperu.com>).

The second report appeared on January 31, 2009, in *La Voz Municipal*, the monthly bulletin of the Santiago River District Municipality, in Awajun–Wampis territory. Under the title “Guayabal: invasion of strange beings, truth or fiction?” the text said:

In late January we were informed by a technical nurse via radio from the community of Guayabal, of the presence of some strange beings who appeared at night and terrorized the entire population. During the first days it seemed incredible, the news from Guayabal was constant and a climate of that nature was worrying for this

reason: the communications team and the commission of authorities travelled to the scene to check the facts; we were welcomed in that community; we were informed of spine-chilling events such as the presence of gringos that appeared; seven community members told us how these beings were; they said that a being descended from space inside a glass sphere and that it reflected multicolored lights; they had made several shots from a distance of 3 meters, but the pellets would not penetrate the bundle; we stayed one night to capture the image of the supposed gringo; we wandered about almost all night long but with no results. We urge people to remain alert in the face of this situation and inform local authorities immediately. Whether this be true or not, we must remain alert. (Boletín 2009)

This news was also reproduced in Leonardo Antich's blog, where there are links to various editions of the Rio Santiago District Municipality bulletin.

Some reacted to these reports with skepticism, as expressed by comments on the reports of flying gringos in the Selva Central region, on Antich's blog. This article is not interested in determining whether these and similar reports circulating among the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis are true. What is important here is that these stories are circulating in native communities, either verbally or through other means of communication, and that they express the native peoples' distress over the gradual occupation of their territories by foreign agents.

The two reports share many similarities. In both cases, foreigners are represented as gringos who wander freely about the communities—either by land or by air—and are invulnerable to bullets, harass native communities, and threaten to kill children to extract their organs, or terrorize their inhabitants at night. Among the Ashaninka these reports have been circulating for quite some time (Lucy Trappnell, personal communication, November 24, 29, and December 5, 2009). People assert that flying gringos have been sighted in areas of Satipo, Pangoa, Ene, and Perené, as well as along the road that connects Puerto Bermúdez with Pucallpa. In this latter place, a group of Ashaninka and colonists saw one of these beings flying over the forest canopy when they were changing a pickup's flat tire. Flying gringos are generally men, but they can sometimes be women. In some of the versions that circulate, it is said that they can fly thanks to iron wings; in other versions, the flying capacity is attributed to small motors attached to their bellies, which they can turn on and off by pressing a button. They generally wander at night. When they move they emit multicolored lights and have powerful flashlights with which they blind their chosen victims. Their objective is to kidnap children and young people—although they occasionally kill adults—to extract their hearts and other organs in order to send them to the United States, where they are used to make transplants for elderly people. They always carry a small freezer with many compartments where they put the different organs extracted from their victims. Some assert that when

flying gringos kidnap a child, they often leave behind some money by way of compensation. In all cases, their victims disappear for good.

The Ashaninka of the Ene and Tambo Rivers claim that flying gringos work in association with the National Program of Direct Support to the Poorer, also known as the Juntos (“Together”) program. This program, created by the government in 2005, provides a monthly incentive of one hundred soles (approximately US\$27) to mothers with children less than 14 years old in exchange for complying with certain conditions, such as undergoing regular gynecological examinations, enrolling their children in school and ensuring that they attend regularly, taking their children to periodic health controls and having them vaccinated, and committing themselves to feed their children with fortified foods provided by the government. The Ashaninka claim that the program’s promoters—generally women—have given the lists of assisted children to the flying gringos and that it is from these lists that the latter choose their victims. This rumor has generated a massive rejection of the Juntos program among the Ashaninka.

People say that flying gringos flee as soon as they are sighted. Some claim that in Pumpuriani (Perene River), community members scared away one of these beings when he was descending from the sky to seize a boy. In some cases the Ashaninka have organized themselves to capture the marauders. It is said, for instance, that in Zutziki (Perene River), community members caught two of them and burned them. In the area of Mazamari they killed one of them and found that he was carrying money with him. According to a widely circulating story, in the Ene River an Ashaninka man who killed a flying gringo and attached to his body the gringo’s little motor, turned on the motor accidentally and flew off at high speed. People say that he landed far away in Poyeni (Tambo River), and that there he was killed by community members who did not recognize him as one of their own. Many assert that flying gringos have a three-year contract with Alan García’s government, the main objective of which is to exterminate the Ashaninka. According to one of the advisors of Pluspetrol, the oil company that operates Oil Block 108 in the Ene River basin, these reports have been invented by native people to scare away oil company workers. However, the anxiety and distress that these reports are causing among the Ashaninka seem to contradict this theory.

The wandering bundles reported among the Awajun and Wampis have certain similarities with the flying gringos of the Selva Central region. In another version of the reports appearing in the monthly bulletin of the Rio Santiago District Municipality, it is said that such bundles travel within glass spheres. When people see them, they usually hide, and when they shoot at them, the bullets bounce and they take off and disappear in the sky. After the first sighting in the community of Guayabal there have been several other sightings of bundles along the Santiago River. The most recent was in Puerto Galilea, where

community members associated the intruders with the fat-extracting *pishtacos* of Andean tradition.

In Awajun and Wampis communities the reports often appear alongside stories of another character known as *sellador*, or stamper. Stampers assume various guises, but they are always civil servants in charge of aid programs who stamp indigenous people on different parts of their bodies with the aim of harming them. In one version, the stamper is an unsightly man, generally accompanied by a young female secretary, who claims to be a defender of children's rights in order to approach indigenous children and talk to them (Pedro García, personal communication, January 29, 2009). Once he is close to them, he stamps his victims' wrists either with a bar code, or with the number 666. According to the New Testament, this number is the "mark of the beast," which Satan will impose on the forehead or right hand of all human beings at the end of time (Apocalypse 13:16–17). In addition, since the publication of Mary Stewart Relfe's *The New Money System 666* (1982), there has been much speculation that all Universal Product Code barcodes contain the number 666, and that the combination of a barcode and the number 666 will be the way in which the Antichrist will mark people in the future, thus fulfilling the Apocalypse prophecy (see, for instance, <http://www.av1611.org/666/barcode.html>). This notion has somehow reached the Awajun and Wampis who, after conversion to Christianity from the 1950s, are well acquainted with the Bible. Although the Awajun–Wampis are vague as to the purpose of the stampers, they intimate that it might be to kidnap and rape the children thus marked.

In another version that coincides with this, the stamper is a female promoter of the Juntos program. After a slow start in 2007 (because it cost more for Awajun and Wampis mothers to travel to where disbursements were made than the amount they obtained), the program took off once it was decentralized. Since then, a high proportion of Awajun and Wampis women with young children registered for the program. In October 2008, however, rumors started circulating that the program's female promoters (who were in charge of making the disbursements, giving orientation talks, and checking whether mothers complied with the program's requirements) were really stampers with unspecified but evil intentions. People said that only the women so marked could work for the government. As a consequence of these rumors, hundreds of Awajun and Wampis women have quit the program.

The third version of reports about this character represents stampers as male or female health promoters in charge of national vaccination campaigns. Distrust of these campaigns has intensified in recent years with the suspension of the yellow fever vaccination initiated in 2007, in the context of the Pisco earthquake, after four vaccinated people died (OMS 2008), and the suspension of the 2008 campaign against hepatitis B in Arequipa, due to increasing concerns about the possible noxious effects of the vaccine's mercurial component (thimerosal), whose function

is to prolong its effectiveness (El Comercio 2008c). In this version, vaccinators are stampers who take advantage of campaigns to mark the bodies of their victims. Some assert that this and other types of vaccines, such as the vaccine against German measles, which is only given to women of reproductive age, aim at sterilizing indigenous women. As a result of these fears, the campaign against hepatitis B had little coverage in Awajun and Wampis communities.

Fear of stamps extends to foods marked with barcodes and especially powdered milk, baby formulas and cereals, as well as other donated fortified foods distributed by government agencies. It is reported that such foods sterilize women and have pernicious effects on those who consume them. In brief, the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis fear that gringos have initiated a campaign to exterminate them either by extracting body parts or substances (such as eyes, organs or fat), or by introducing noxious substances (stamps, vaccines, or fortified foods) into their bodies.

These fears were also expressed in the aftermath of the violent events that took place in Bagua in 2009, when human rights defenders reported a story circulating among the Awajun: the government was planning to inject Awajun detainees with the blood of the dead policemen—which reveals Awajun fears of inoculation with harmful substances (FIDH 2009:32). More importantly, the Awajun, Wampis, and Ashaninka feel that the campaign has been undertaken with the overt, or covert, complicity of the government, which has signed contracts with gringo people to achieve its aims, or have put at their disposal its agencies with the aim of making indigenous people ill, or sterilizing, raping, or killing them.

Personhood, Illness, and Competition for Life Forces

The negative perceptions upheld by the Awajun, Wampis, and Ashaninka with regards to Peruvian or foreign whites is undoubtedly informed by their historical interaction with them; an interaction plagued with instances of exploitation, epidemics, dispossession, killings, and enslavement (Varese 1973; Brown 1984). In this juncture, however, such perceptions have combined with the set of ideas that Santos-Granero (2009) encompasses under the notion of “political economies of life,” to give origin to a broad range of stories about a series of white supernatural beings who harass native communities with their evil powers.

Awajun, Wampis, and Ashaninka notions of personhood, illness, and inter-specific competition express clearly this set of ideas. The Awajun and Wampis affirm that all living beings, including many objects, have a spiritual essence: *wakan* in the case of humans; *aents*, or “person,” in that of non-humans (Brown 1986:54–55). *Aents* are thought to have human shape—a vestige of the original human nature of their owners—and are conceived of as collective animal souls represent-

ing all individuals of any given species. In addition, some animals and plants are said to be “owned” or “controlled” by powerful mythical beings, such as Nugkui, the female earth spirit, who controls a large variety of garden plants, domesticated animals, and wild animals (Brown 1986:50). Given that humans depend on animals and plants for their subsistence and that the latter were originally human beings, relationships with them are considered to be extremely delicate and requiring compliance with a large number of taboos. The two most important in relation to animals are the prohibitions to hunt too many individuals of the same species and to treat the bones and remains of hunted animals disrespectfully (Brown 1986:91–92). The breaking of these taboos is thought to bring about *shimpankamu*, a condition imposed by the animal spirits thus disrespected by which hunters are unable to find game (Brown 1986:70).

The same happens with garden plants. If they are maltreated by the woman who has planted them or by other people, they might take revenge by sucking the blood of the transgressors. Instances of maltreatment include harvesting all plants of the same species within a garden, or leaving carelessly behind portions of the harvested crops. The act by which plants suck the blood of a transgressor is known as “soul eating” and it is understood as the “tapping of a person’s life force such that he or she becomes weak, pale, and unable to resist death” (Brown 1986:106). The rationale behind these taboos, which seem to be shared by all Jivaro-speaking peoples, is the idea that “the possibilities of human existence are finite and dependent on a chronically insufficient stock of virtualities of persons” (Taylor 1994:74).

The Ashaninka also assert that all beings—humans, animals, plants, and objects—are endowed with human-shaped souls (*ishire*) that betray their common human origin. For this reason, they consider all living beings to be “people.” However, whereas the souls of human beings are contained within their bodies, the souls of non-human beings appear as the external “mothers” (*iniro*), or “fathers” (*iriri*), of particular plant or animal species (Chevalier 1982:344). Mystical progenitors are conceived of as “owners” of their “children,” but also as their “guardians” and “protectors.” In addition, forest animals and fish have “chief owners”—Maninkari and Kiatsi, respectively—who keep their wards in caves and pools and decide when and how many of them they will release for the Ashaninka to catch (Elick 1970:49; Weiss 1975:287). The Ashaninka assert that these mystical owners are extremely protective of their children. The fathers of the different animal species become aggrieved when hunters kill too many of their wards (Elick 1970:53). In such cases, they may appear to the hunter in animal form to make him ill. Animal guardians also become angry when careless hunters shoot one of their wards without killing it and the animal bleeds to death in vain (Elick 1970:48). In those cases, the angry father avenges the death of the animal by attracting the hunter to a cave and turning him into one of his animals.

The basis for these conceptions seems to be the same as among the Awajun and Wampis, namely, that life is a scarce resource and all living beings compete to accumulate as much vital force as possible, even if this is in detriment of other species. This is why the mothers and fathers of plants and animals punish people who overexploit their wards, or kill them recklessly, by sending them mortal diseases. The underlying principle is that some kind of balance between competing species must be achieved before generalized predation leads to the annihilation of any given species and, thus, to an irreversible disruption of the world. Among the Ashaninka this is an explicit notion. Shamans are charged with the task of maintaining equilibrium between humans and the spirit guardians of animals and plants (Elick 1970:211).

We propose that the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis conceive of the relationship between different human groups, or categories of human beings, in the same terms as they conceive of the relationship between humans, plants, and animals, to wit, a relation of competition for life forces that must reach a certain balance despite of the principle of asymmetry and structural disequilibrium that characterizes it (Taylor 1994:74). Such competition has been particularly keen between native Amazonians and white people, with whites dispossessing and enslaving natives to enrich themselves, and natives trying to pacify white people in order to acquire some of their extraordinary powers. The problem today is that the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis feel that the possibility of equilibrium—of a balanced predation so to speak—has been broken. From their perspective, at present whites are not only exploiting native peoples, as they have been doing for hundreds of years, dispossessing them of their resources and with them their sources of life, but have decided to exterminate them with the active support of the State.

Conclusion

It could be argued that the correlation between the present situation of capitalist encroachment of native Amazonian territories and resources, and the appearance of narratives of white supernatural beings is circumstantial. It could also be contended that the notion that these narratives express an indigenous concern for survival is a mere inference. However, such a concern is also found in a variety of documents produced by indigenous leaders and organizations, as well as in the statements of the many native peoples struggling to defend their lands.

A declaration by the Awajun and Wampis in the context of the August 2008 Amazonian strike, notes: “This indigenous mobilization is an expression of our opposition to the legislation promulgated by the present government, which vulnerates our ancestral rights to the land, and constitutes *a just demand so that our*

lives are respected and the government stop emitting norms that put in jeopardy our very existence” (Pronunciamiento 2008, emphasis added). A similar sentiment is found among the Ashaninka. In a declaration by CARE in 2009, opposing the building of the Paquitzapango dam, the signatories conclude: “Although we have contributed with our blood and lives to the pacification of the country, organizing ourselves in self-defense committees, the government brings us new threats: the concession of our lands to oil companies and the construction of hydroelectric dams. We see these attacks to our territory as one more violent attack that attempts directly against our lives and our existence as a people. *This leads us to a single conclusion: that the government intends to exterminate us*” (Pronunciamiento 2009, emphasis added).

These stories of bundles, stampers, and flying gringos respond to the generalized feeling that white people and the State that represents (in the case of Peruvian whites) or promotes them (in the case of gringos) intend to exterminate native Amazonian peoples. The massacre of Awajun and Wampis protesters in Bagua during the 2009 strike confirms this perception, as expressed by the desperate and enraged words that an Awajun woman addressed to President Alan García when interviewed for a national television program: “You are the one to blame because you are exterminating us. You are killing us. You are selling us. You are the terrorist ... We, the Awajun-Wampis, have not elected you so that you could exterminate us but so that you could help us ... *You have already exterminated us, now we have nothing*” (Testimonio 2009, emphasis added).

Encroached upon by oil, mining, and lumber companies, invaded by construction workers, and threatened by legislative decrees and government policies seeking to erode a protective legal structure that had been constructed with so much effort throughout the past decades, the Ashaninka, Awajun, and Wampis, like other indigenous peoples of Peruvian Amazonia, feel that they are engaged in a final struggle: a definitive struggle from which they can only emerge victorious or dead.

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