

# Ajútap/Arútam/Christ and the Jivaro victory over death<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The Awajún leader Santiago Manuín, interviewed by the author, witnesses the recent diffusion, among a part of his people, of the conscious overlap between Ajútap/Arútam, the god of the traditional Jivaro indigenous religions, and Jesus Christ. This observation raises a reflection on the central presence of death in human life, and the different symbolic solutions that arise to cope with it, proposed, on one side, by these religions and, on the other side, by the capitalist/consumerist culture of the globalized world.

**Keywords:** Amazonian indigenous religions, Awajún, Jivaro, Christianity, syncretism, capitalism, death anxiety

## RÉSUMÉ

Le dirigeant Awajún Santiago Manuín, interrogé par l'auteur, est témoin de la diffusion récente parmi une partie de son peuple de la conscience d'un chevauchement entre Ajútap/Arútam, le dieu des religions traditionnelles des indiennes Jivaros et Jésus Christ. Ce fait soulève une réflexion sur la présence centrale de la mort dans la vie humaine, et les différentes solutions symboliques pour y faire face qui sont proposées, d'un côté, par ces religions et, de l'autre, par la culture capitaliste / consumériste du monde globalisé.

**Mots-clés :** religions indigènes amazoniennes, Awajún, Jivaro, Christianisme, syncrétisme, capitalisme, angoisse de mort

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## INTRODUCTION

The Awajún are indigenous people living along the high Marañón River, a tributary of the Amazon River, and along several other tributaries of the former (Nieva, Bajo Santiago, Cenepa, Potro, Apaga, Yurapaga). They also populate some areas of the high Mayo River, a tributary of the Huallaga River. According to the most recent estimate, the Awajún population exceeds 52,000 individuals (INEI, 2018), which makes it the second-most numerous Peruvian indigenous group of the Amazonian basin after the Ashaninka. They are part of a larger group of tribes (Shuar, Awajún, Wampis, Achuar), together named the Jivaro/Jibaro, who share a similar culture and language and populate the bordering Amazonian territories of Ecuador and Colombia (Harner, 1972; Brown 1984, 1985, 2014).

The Jivaro have been living for centuries in small local social groups formed of large polygenic families. Traditionally, the latter were not concentrated in villages, but lived in big family houses scattered in the territories along the tributaries of the major rivers (Karsten, 1935; Harner, 1972; Guallart, 1989; Brown 1984, 1985, 2014; Descola, 1996). The large families instituted strong social relations with each other through the marriages of cross-cousins. The economy was based, as can still be observed in various areas, on hunting, plant gathering, small horticulture, and breeding (Descola, 1996; Brown, 1984, 1985, 2014; Riola Gala, 2015).

This article arises from the contents of an interview with the Awajún leader Santiago Manuín in July 2019 in the town of Santa Maria de Nieva in the Peruvian Amazon.<sup>3</sup> The conversation reflects on the Jivaro religion, as recounted in Manuín's words, and more particularly on the correspondence between Jesus Christ and Ajútap/Arútam, the god of the religions of the Awajún and the other Jivaro indigenous groups. Ajútap is the name used in the Awajún language while Arútam is the name used in the Shuar language to refer to the same god. For linguistic convenience I will define Ajútap/Arútam as a god because it is with this meaning that the Jivaro consider him homologous to Jesus Christ, although, as specified below, it is actually a very complex being and difficult to define according to the usual categories of Western culture.

I question the possible meaning of this correspondence proposed by Manuín, considering the recent spread of this idea among the Jivaro people and the sharp differences that, according to past ethnographic descriptions of Ajútap/Arútam, seem to distinguish this god from Jesus Christ. Consequently, my reflection moves toward a comparison between the apparent meaning of this putative correspondence and the characteristics of the capitalist/consumerist thought within current Peruvian and globalized society regarding death.

Santiago Manuín was born in 1957 in the Rio Dominguisa area, in the Condorcanqui district of the department of Amazonas, Peru. He held many offices as representative of Awajún and Wampis associations, spent many years of his life cooperating with the Jesuit missionaries, and was one of the founding members of the Jesuit social center SAIPE (Agricultural Service for Research and Economic Promotion) (Manuín and Romero, 2018). In 1994 he received the "Queen Sophia of Spain International Award" for his commitment to the defense of the environment and human rights (Brown, 2014).

He became one of the most well-known Awajún leaders when, in 2009, he fought to defend the rights of his people to manage their ancestral lands which were being threatened by certain

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<sup>3</sup> An open interview was conducted in July 2019 with Santiago Manuín, in his home, located at short distance from the town of Santa Maria de Nieva. The interview was recorded entirely with an audio instrument and subsequently faithfully transferred to a written text, which was then elaborated and interpreted. For this, an open codification method was used, to develop interpretative schemes not decided a priori, but rather suggested by the words and topics specifically expressed by Manuín. Core concepts that emerged from the interview and the data provided by the ethnographic literature on the subject have been put in comparison with some basic principles of Christian theology and anthropology.

decisions of the Peruvian government in the tragic social conflict known as “the events of Bagua” (Gomez and Manaces, 2010; Favier, 2013, Romio, 2018a), or *Baguazo*, from the name of the principal city where the conflict took place.

Manuín is held in high regard and remembered as a great defender of both human rights and the Amazonian ecologic environment not only by his own people, but also by the representatives of the larger Peruvian and international civil society. He passed away in July 2020 while this paper was being written.

A few days after Manuín’s death, Alfredo Vizcarra, bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Jaén and Peru’s coordinator of the Panamazonic Ecclesial Network (REPAM), dedicated to him the following speech, which allows us to understand how precious the activity of Santiago Manuín was for the Catholic Church and, in particular, for the Jesuit missionaries with whom he collaborated until the last moments of his life:

We have to thank him for his life, for his example of searching, for having the vision to be able to commit himself, to fully commit himself in the search for a good living for his people. We thank him for his Christian witness, because in this search, he has been able to make the synthesis between the religious experience of his people and the Christian faith. In fact, there are many inheritances, the legacy, that he leaves to us. His family and the Awajún people have his example and enough encouragement to help them continue on the path, in the search for the vision for the good living of all (Ñiquen, 2020).

## **The Awajún worldview**

According to ethnological data, the first Jivaro assumption about the world is that it is determined by events that take place in a dimension ordinarily inaccessible to human perception, but which can be contacted directly under specific conditions. With regard to this “hidden world,” the ethnologist Michael Harner (1972: 134) wrote the following:

The Jivaro believe that the true determinants of life and death are normally invisible forces which can be seen and utilized only with the aid of hallucinogenic drugs. The normal waking life is explicitly viewed as ‘false’ or ‘a lie’, and it is firmly believed that truth about causality is to be found by entering the supernatural world, for they feel that the events that take place within it underlie and are the basis for many of the surface manifestations and mysteries of daily life.

In the same way, Ajútap/Arútam holds a central role among the Jivaro. The ethnographic accounts do not always agree on the characteristics of this god, and a wide variety of interpretations on the meaning of the term Ajútap/Arútam has been offered (Harner, 1972; Brown, 1984, 2014; Delgado Sumar, 1986; Guallart, 1989; Pellizzaro 1990; Maider, 1999; Meiser, 2011). The term is considered to define: a) one or many personal beings (deities or ancestral spirits), in singular or plural forms, provided with the ability of changing their appearance; b) the immortal final destination of the wandering and transformation of the human soul after death; c) an eternal impersonal powerful agency; d) the eternal essence of every being that inhabits the Jivaro religious world; and e) a sort of vision/perception that provides immortality to the human being that receives it. Eternity is the common characteristic that all these interpretations share: in fact, the word Ajútap/Arútam in Jivaro languages means “eternal being.”

According to almost all ethnographic reports, Ajútap/Arútam had a strong connection to the subject of death; Harner reported that “it is in the system of thought regarding the Arútam soul that the Jivaro seek security from the ever-felt menace of death” (Harner, 1972: 135).

The Ajútap/Arútam soul does not belong to the human being from his birth but has to be acquired through a vision. Father José María Guallart, a Jesuit missionary who spent several decades of his life among the Awajún along the Marañón river, testified that the “Ajútap vision” is, for an Aguaruna male<sup>4</sup>, “the most ritual [sic], rich and transcendental magico-religious experience.” This belief presents itself as a traditional experience, multiform in its content and painted with feelings and imaginative representations of any kinds (Guallart, 1989: 165). Even though Ajútap’s action would extend to all aspects of the individual personality, the features most commonly associated with this being are killing, protection from enemies, and providing invulnerability: the war features of Ajútap, in short, are considered to be of paramount importance in the Aguaruna’s life (Guallart, 1989).

At the time of Harner’s and Guallart’s fieldwork, males were led to seek the Ajútap vision starting at the age of six. They were accompanied by adults, commonly the father, to the highest waterfall within a few days’ travel. The Ajútap/Arútam spirits were believed to wander about those places as breezes. The vision seekers bathed naked under the waterfall. By night they slept near the falls and during the days they spent there, they fasted and drank tobacco juice. They might keep up this fasting, bathing, and tobacco juice drinking for several days. Sometimes one of the seekers, in order to obtain the vision, had to drink the juice of the psychotropic plant Maikua (*Datura arborea*). According to Guallart, this first rite, called *Ayamtai* among the Awajún, was followed by another during adolescence based on the ritual drinking of the juice of the psychotropic plant Datem (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) which is today most commonly known outside the Jivaro world as Ayahuasca, or the “vine of the dead”.

Ajútap/Arútam frequently appeared to the vision seeker in the shape of a pair of jaguars or anacondas fighting one another, or in other zoomorphic shapes (Harner, 1972, Guallart, 1989, Delgado Sumer, 1986, Brown, 2014). The vision of Ajútap/Arútam was considered necessary for any male to become a warrior able to kill his enemies. As reported by Harner (1972), after receiving the vision, the children or the young males were seized with a desire to kill. The personality of the children appeared deeply changed. In the span of some months, they would have to join their first expedition to kill other human beings (Karsten, 1935, Harner, 1972, Guallart, 1989). Therefore, we can observe that, according to ethnographic testimonies, Ajútap/Arútam would drive Jivaro males who received its vision to kill other human beings considered their ritual enemies.

Before the seventies of the past century, the ritual encounter with Ajútap/Arútam was linked not only with killing, but also with the subsequent ritual of cutting and shrinking the heads of those killed. This ritual activity took the same name in the several languages of the Jivaro peoples: *tsantsa*. According to Karsten (1935), Harner (1972), and Guallart (1989), obtaining human heads for the *tsantsa* ritual was the primary goal of the killing expedition and the consequent ritual war. The ritual enemy of the Awajún was the Wampis, the enemy of the Shuar was the Achuar or the same Wampis, and vice versa. In the *tsantsa* ritual the shrunken head was believed to contain the soul of the killed enemy and its creation would give protection from the possible revenge of the latter. From this ethnographic data, an important relation between Ajútap/Arútam and the human anxiety related to the murder, hence death, emerges. We will analyze this point in more detail below.

To deepen our understanding of Ajútap/Arútam, it can be useful to approach how the Jivaro people give shape to the destiny of the soul after death. The hidden, invisible world is thought to be inhabited by different kinds of souls that wander about after the death of a human being. According to ethnologists like Harner (1972), the soul is considered to be passive during a person’s ordinary life

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<sup>4</sup> Guallart, as Brown in his first works, uses the term Aguaruna to indicate the Awajún.

and of relatively little interest in the belief system; however, interest in it becomes very high after death.

While Ajútap/Arútam is considered to live eternally outside of human beings, other forms of invisible beings connected to human death are thought to escape from the body of the dead and go through a series of transformations. The ethnological descriptions of these souls are not always in agreement. One stage, however, which contains a wandering soul named *iwanch*, is always found. This soul shows a restless and anxious character and is often described as being in a state of perpetual hunger. Its attitude toward human beings remains, in many cases, uncertain and contradictory.

The situation is distinctly different when the soul comes from a man who was murdered. This soul is very dangerous because it becomes an *ebesak* or *muisak*, whose sole reason for existence is to avenge the death of its owner. In this situation the soul takes the form of a demon who wants to kill. In the past, the existence of the *ebesak/muisak* soul was directly connected to the *tsantsa* ritual and indirectly to Ajútap/Arútam, who allowed the possessor to win the death. The *tsantsa* rituals and the belief in the vengeful souls built, for decades and possibly centuries, a unitary complex of war expeditions for the ritual killing of enemies.

### **Awajún contact with Christianity**

The history of contact between the Jivaro people of Peru and Christianity began in the early 1600s, but was interrupted when the Jesuit order was expelled from Peru in 1768 (Taylor, 1999). Contact resumed at the end of the nineteenth century, during which time it also affected the Jivaros of Ecuador. This contact happened rather late compared to many other Amazonian indigenous populations. The delay in contact was the consequence of the strong resistance of the Jivaros to colonial domination, either European or Incaic, which lasted several centuries and prevented any invaders from entering their lands.

Jivaro resistance was broken down only between the end of the 1800s and the early 1900s, by the cruel violence of the rubber seekers and their mercenaries who invaded the north-western corner of the Amazonian region. The high Marañón River basin became an extremely violent place (Guallart, 1990), but the Christian Jesuits entered the region anyway and began to set up missions around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are still present today. In 1894, missionaries from the Salesian order established themselves in the territories of the Shuar and Achuar peoples in Ecuador (García, 1999), and again one century later in their territories on the Peruvian side of the border.

Other Christian churches entered the Jivaro territory at the end of the rubber boom and manifested an approach toward indigenous spirituality more inclined toward facilitating indigenous development and the “evolution” of their lifestyle as opposed to revitalizing their native traditional culture (Meiser, 2018), efforts of which were more characteristic of the Jesuits and Salesians. The evangelical Church of the Nazarene founded its first school in 1935, six years after setting up their first mission in Awajún territory. In 1940, the Jesuit missionaries followed the evangelical example and began to build their own schools (Riol Gala, 2015). The mission’s educative system drove the indigenous populations to abandon their traditional uses of their territory and to move to live near the schools. Consequently, several young people, after having completed their education, started to abandon their land and look for work in the cities. Others decided to remain.

The adaptation of the Jivaro people to western culture and the Christian religion is today a complex matter open to different and sometimes conflicting interpretations, as we will analyze in the second part of this article. The overlap between Ajútap/Arútam and Jesus Christ could perhaps allow us to make clearer some aspects of this process.

Father Guallart and Harner did not report any relation between Ajútap/Arútam and Jesus Christ. Brown (2014), wrote of an explicit opposition between the two figures among the Awajún of

the high Mayo river, giving a chapter of his work the sharp title of “*Jesus versus the Warrior Spirits*”, alluding to Ajútap with the latter term. It should be noted, however, that he performed his research among indigenous people that lived in contact with evangelical missionaries. In describing the forms of adaptation of the Awajún people to the experience of Christianity, Romio (2018b) affirms that the oniric experience of personal contact with Jesus Christ follows the traditional indigenous model of the meeting with Ajútap. There are definitely overlaps between the forms of these two experiences (Romio, 2018b). Romio reports experiences and testimonies that belong to the Autonomous Awajún Church, an evangelical church.

The testimonies of the overlap between Ajútap/Arútam and Jesus Christ come instead from indigenous people that had stable contacts with Catholic missionaries. While doing research among the Shuar and Achuar people, neighbors belonging to the same Jivaro linguistic family of the Awajún, Mader (1999: 160) reports that “since the seventies the Salesian mission devoted itself to fit the idea of the Arútam to the Christian idea of God” and the “use of the Arútam’s concept to refer to God” has been spread even in the books of prayers.

Meiser (2011, 2018) reported that among the Shuar people, Arútam and Jesus Christ are considered to be different manifestations of the same divine power. Meiser attributes this religious conviction to the clear influence of the Salesian missionaries in the context of the Catholic Autochthonous Church of the Achuar and Shuar, which is an extension of the Roman Catholic Church that works deliberately to “indigenize” Catholic theology and liturgy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following sections, I try to provide an answer to the complex research question that arose from the analysis of the data. This question investigates the belief in a correspondence between Jesus Christ and the indigenous Ajútap/Arútam, the meaning of this correspondence, and its comparison with the capitalist/consumerist thought in regard to the concept and experience of death.

My interpretation moves between epistemological and ontological assumptions of Jivaro, Christian, and modern capitalist/consumerist worldviews in order to try to bridge them and possibly achieve a better understanding of their common human ground.

### “I am”

The interview with Manuín was aimed at understanding his thoughts about the relation between the Awajún and Christian religions, the traditional life of his people, and the changes imposed on them by the rules and the values of the current capitalistic/consumeristic culture. Before I could pose any specific question, Manuín began to describe the ritual retreat practiced by the Awajún people and Ajútap/Arútam:

Ajútap is a being that doesn’t appear in our mythological telling. We have to take Ayahuasca in order to find and receive the strength of Ajútap. And at that time he tells ‘I am’<sup>5</sup>. The word ‘*ajút*’ means eternal, what exists and has always been existing. If we imagine giving a gift, and that gift is able to remain intact for 40, 80, 100 years, we would say that this gift is eternal, because it has seen the passing of the generations.

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<sup>5</sup> Here Manuín speaks, in a metaphorical way, of a correspondence between making oneself visible and telling ‘I am’. He neglects to say that Ajútap, according to his religion, “tells” by making himself visible and real as eternal ‘I am’.

Manuín continued speaking about an Awajún way to human realization, which according to him overlaps structurally with the biblical meeting of Moses and God (Exodus 3:14). In the biblical example, God reveals himself through a burning bush with the name “I am”, whereas the indigenous experience involves a meeting with Ajútap through the intake of Ayahuasca, a plant-made beverage that Manuín considers to act as mediator between “I am” and the human being. To better understand Manuín’s words, we should remember that Christianity believes wine, which contains a powerful psychotropic component, to be the blood of Christ. Manuín described Ajútap as the Awajún’s essence of the biblical “I am”, and at the same time as the ontological “I am” of the Awajún people. According to Manuín, the Awajún need to discover that the true Jesus Christ and Ajútap honored by their predecessors are the same being. The indigenous leader affirmed that with Jesus Christ the eternal “I am” revealed itself again to the Awajún people, this time in a human shape:

This being gives his message and keeps saying in the Gospel: ‘I am the light, the true pathway, the true vine’. My people lived that mystery, and the seal of truth is the word of God, who spoke to Moses and now speaks to my people as well. Then, ‘I am’ became a man and held the name Jesus, the Christ. Following this way, I combined Christianity to my spirituality that is the same of my people, and which is a deep spirituality. Far before having heard about Jesus, the Awajún people managed themselves in order to cope with different problems, such as those of the territories, the social and political issues, and so on. And from ancient times we could always rely on that spiritual foundation. The master plants are utilized nowadays, and this is what we have to deliver as heritage to our descendants, as long as we shall deliver the Gospel of Christ to our people and they can understand it and its story.

Therefore, the master plants are considered by Manuín as the current Awajún way to meet Jesus Christ, the eternal Ajútap.

### **The current encounters with Ajútap**

On the occasion of our interview with Manuín, in the adjacent wilds we assisted in the first part of a rite performed by a group of adolescents. They were led by an herbalist doctor to meet Ajútap through the drinking of Datem (Ayahuasca). Manuín told us the following:

At one side we have Ajútap, at the other side the human being. Ajútap communicates, and the human being tries to grasp his message. Amidst there are the hills, the mountains, the birds, the clouds, the rivers, the creation. In this world of nature comes the Datem, the Tsaág<sup>6</sup> and the Baikua<sup>7</sup>. The Awajún people take these plants, God communicates through the plants and nature speaks to the human being and tells him ‘I am’. Without these things, it does not work.

In the last decades, and with the end of ritual wars and *tsantsa* ceremonies (Pozo, 2017), among the most traditional individuals of the Awajún and Jivaro ethnic groups, the psychotropic plants (Baud, 2011) and the dreams have remained their only direct connection to Ajútap/Arútam through visions.

The ethnologists who worked among the Awajún and the other Jivaro indigenous groups testify to the almost exclusive association between the vision/embodiment of Ajútap/Arútam and the drinking of decoctions of psychotropic plants. These plants are Tobacco, *Banisteriopsis caapi*, named

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<sup>6</sup> Tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*).

<sup>7</sup> Toé (*Brugmansia suaveolens*).

Datem or Ayahuasca, and some varieties of Brugmansia and Datura, that among the Jivaro groups hold several names, most frequently Bikut, Baikua or Maikua, and Tsuak. A mixture of Ayahuasca and *Diplopterys cabrerana*, locally known as Yagé, is drunk only by the shamans, named *iwishin*, during their healing ceremonies. In the last decades, the activity of the Christian missionaries diminished the diffusion of the ritual use of these psychotropic plants, mostly because they forbid these practices. However, Manuín, who cooperated daily with the Jesuit missionaries, promoted and considered necessary the use of these plants, particularly for the education of adolescents and their introduction to the status of an adult male.

### **“Jesus is the same Arútam” in the surface and in the “hidden world”**

Meiser (2011) affirms that the Jivaro belief that “Jesus is the same Arútam” shows inconsistency with the theories of Lévi-Strauss (1955), and Descola (1993) and several other anthropologists after them, which both announce the unavoidable end of any indigenous cultural identity as a consequence of Western and Christian colonization.

Stressing the strong changes imposed by Catholic theology and liturgy through its missions among the Shuar, Meiser points out that the Arútam/Jesus case demonstrates, in a more general sense, the negotiability of the cultural boundaries that can emerge in the dynamic process of relation between the “own” and the “other”, between the “inner” and the “alien” visions. Meiser emphasizes the transcultural process that manifests itself:

The transcultural approach does not imply that differences between cultures are irrelevant or non-existent for the people affected by the encounter between the Old World and the New World, but it emphasizes the openness of culture and underlines the human capability to handle actively the cultural ‘Other’. It is obvious for the Achuar and Shuar that ‘Jesus’ is an imported symbol which has not been native to their culture. However, the indigenous are able to appropriate ‘Jesus’ into their culture in the sense of ‘making him [their] own’. (Meiser, 2011: 507)

Meiser declares her will to demonstrate that the phrase “Jesus is the same Arútam” cited from the words of a Shuar informant may not necessarily be a “deliberately researched syncretism” as affirmed by Descola (1993), but “a reasonable statement”, motivated by its inner logic and the transcultural process that it implies, with the missionaries “indigenized” and the indigenous “missionized” (Meiser, 2011).

However, the inner logic and transcultural process described by Meiser fails to mention intertribal wars and *tsantsa* rituals, which Harner called the “pinnacle” of Jivaro social life (1972: 193). Therefore, I think we cannot stop our investigation at Meiser’s interesting controversy with Lévi-Strauss and Descola because that level of reflection does not take into account in any way, nor with any “inner logic”, the paradoxical and astonishing overlap between the figures of a head-hunter killer warrior spirit and a god-man who preached love, and willingly accepted death<sup>8</sup>. I consider both head-cutting and letting oneself be crucified as facts that lay far “beyond the pleasure principle” (Freud, 1991) and indicate the centrality of the issue of the death for human beings.

I think it necessary therefore to identify beneath the apparently easy and egalitarian – but absolutely not “reasonable” – statement that “Jesus is the same Arútam” a hidden and deeper meaning that helps us to investigate a question that is central to understand what I single out as the human death problem.

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, some Christian medieval images of Jesus Christ depicted him as a warrior fighting against malicious entities, which makes him more similar to the traditional character of Ajútap/Arútam.

## **The hidden weight of death in human life**

When analyzing the ethnological data in order to answer the research question, I focus on the explicit centrality of the experience of death within the religious and social life of the Awajún, Shuar and other Jivaro indigenous groups. This has been made evident in the past through the symbolic meaning of the *tsantsa* rituals, and the danger represented by the vengeful soul of the killed enemy. The warriors and the people who took part in the rituals felt they could get control over death and protect themselves from the threat of the vengeful soul.

According to Harner and the ethnologists who experienced the *tsantsa* rituals, the rituals were viewed by the Jivaro “as the pinnacle of their social lives. It is also expected, given the ethos of killing and counter-killing, that this, the greatest celebration, revolves around the indisputable evidence of a triumph over a common enemy” (Harner, 1972: 193).

Analyzing the details of the rituals, it is possible to consider that this hidden and deeper “common enemy”, shared by both sides, was just the shared experience of anxiety and anguish linked to the human death. According to a recent multidisciplinary theory named “terror management theory” (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011), supported by many empirical studies conducted in several countries, human life is conditioned and almost determined by a state of anxiety caused by the existence of death. The theory is rooted in insights outlined by Becker’s multidisciplinary work (1973) and affirms that human beings are animals oriented toward self-preservation, and that they have the cognitive abilities of self-reflection, causal analysis, and future anticipation that give awareness of the inevitability of death. The juxtaposition of death awareness and the instinct of self-preservation would generate a status of anxiety and terror that must be managed during life (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). Harner (1972), Guallart (1989) and Brown (2014) have marked their impression of a considerable anxiety linked to death observable in the social life of the Jivaro. Moreover, we must consider that according to the “terror management theory” the anxiety caused by death is supposed to be an emotion common to all human beings.

For the Jivaros, killing the enemy and imprisoning his revenged soul into the shrunken heads was therefore a way to take symbolic control of the unsolvable problem which threatens human life, namely the anxiety caused by death. Ajútap/Arútam delivered its power of immortality and eternity to human beings by giving them the opportunity to triumph over their anxiety in the face of death. In my assumption, the original past character of Ajútap/Arútam indicates with dramatic clearness the central and veiled importance of death in human life and the hope of winning against it.

## **The Awajún and Christian victories: Two different ways to go through death**

Ajútap/Arútam and Jesus Christ are the supreme beings that, respectively in Jivaro and Christian religion, can deliver to human beings the hope of victory over death. Although Manuín did not refer to this common feature in his interview, as he did not focus on the topic of past interpretations of Ajútap/Arútam as a warrior being, we could not fail to notice this common characteristic of the two supreme beings that Manuín connected on another level; their shared attribute of eternity and, therefore, invulnerability in facing death.

The *tsantsa* rituals show, in an evident and direct way, how death can have a central role inside a social group and still remain a source of anxiety and anguish, as well as aggression and excitation, and even become a source of enthusiasm and provide a sense of realization when brought upon other human beings. In the *tsantsa* case, human death was effectively brought forth and realized, thus offering the possibility of an explicit symbolic antidote to something threatening and feared as a consequence of a human killing, namely revenge.

In a far different way, the Christian religion gives central attention to death and the human hope to triumph over it through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is possible to cite many relevant Christian theological texts to support the doctrinal foundation of this claim. One example is the *Gaudium et Spes*, a foundational document of the II Vatican Council, which testifies to the centrality of the eschatological theme of victory over death, the “ultimate reality”, new and definitive, of the story:

Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us. Christ has risen, destroying death by His death; He has lavished life upon us (33) so that, as sons in the Son, we can cry out in the Spirit; Abba, Father (34)” (Paul VI, 1965)

Almost every prayer in the Christian liturgy closes remembering the glory of the resurrection toward which every celebration of Christian Easter aims, in which creatures are made free from sin and death. This becomes evident at the end of time in the resurrection of their bodies. The mystery of death, inside the Christian liturgy, is made clear and finally won through the resurrection of Christ.

### **The modern capitalist/consumerist attitude toward death**

It is perhaps impossible to understand fundamental aspects of other cultures without having first achieved an adequate understanding of one’s own. Franco Brovelli suggests that in modern western society, death as an event is almost completely silenced and absent from the social scene. It does not find any place of explicit expression in contemporary thought (Brovelli, 1984). Brovelli interrogates the causes and consequences of this silence, which seems to declare an absence. He comes to the conclusion that it is necessary to acknowledge that this attempt to censure the reality of death was not successful: for the individual, death remains a threat, although unspeakable, since the individual is not allowed to declare his own end in a social whole that thinks of itself as limitless (Brovelli, 1984: 463).

Perhaps this evaluation of Brovelli could be considered too drastic; however, it is difficult to deny that in capitalistic/consumeristic modern societies the problem of death seems to have lost its preeminent centrality. The symbolic process that moves modern society seems to erase the explicit image of death from the ordinary sociocultural scene. In the last decades, several authors have focused their interest on the centrality of death in human life and the possible individual and social denial of it, framing it in terms of causes and consequences (Becker, 1973; Kopczuk & Slemrod, 2005; Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). Taking inspiration from Max Weber (1904), Walter Benjamin (1921) compared capitalism to religious thought. Several other authors (Goodchild, 2001; Löwy, 2009; Bruni, 2019) have debated this theme more recently, in different terms, but without taking into specific consideration the symbolic presence of death in modern society.

I deem that analyzing the presence of death in modern society could help us bridge very different worldviews and identify, beyond them, a common human ground which could permit a better reciprocal understanding of different religions and cultures. This article, far from attaining the possibility of proposing a definite theoretical model regarding this issue, aims at stimulating further research in this direction.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Different symbolic attitudes toward death and their consequences**

The Awajún/Jivaro and Christian religions, together with the modern capitalist/consumerist globalized world, perhaps share a great concern about death and the human necessity of coping with it and obtaining a symbolic victory. Death, as the end of the individual human life, is completely unavoidable and the explicit or hidden concern regarding death, together with its strong, deeply emotional and symbolic presence, seems to accompany human existence. The Christian religion is focused on the victory of Christ over an explicit and painful death. The *tsantsa* ritual, with its active performing of human killing, shows the extreme importance of death in the social life of the Jivaro peoples. Their contemporary belief in the power of Ajútap/Arútam, which can be related or not to Jesus Christ, together with their ritual use of psychotropic plants that has been maintained even after the end of the *tsantsa* rituals, confirms the central role of death inside their religion.

The subsistence activities of these Amazonian indigenous people are still permeated with a sacred dimension containing scattered, and often informal individual beliefs and rituals in which their human life is confronted daily with death. Besides, there is a special dimension of death, over which the indigenous peoples seem to have gained an exemplary victory, even until recent times: the victory of the forest and its beings. The dwellers of the forest die and their souls and spirits escape from their bodies; however, the forest, supported by hidden spiritual agencies, goes on living, surviving the death of mortal beings. Therefore, the forest has been made almost immortal through the presence of the Jivaro peoples. They have been able to live in the forest without spoiling it for its many other dwellers. Human beings and their societies and cultures will go on living thanks to the forest. It is their victory over death.

This article hopes to stimulate investigation into the specific characteristics of different religious and cultural attitudes towards death. The hidden symbolic presence of death in human life, along with its possible transformations, could prove to be very important in terms of its consequences in the economic, ecological, and psychosocial domains.

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