Between Rupture and Continuity

The Politics of Conversion in the Colombian Amazon

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Abstract

This paper explores the *politics of conversion* in the Colombian Amazon, comparing missionary narratives of conversion with indigenous accounts of conversion. It shows how conversion to Christianity articulates new meanings of indigeneity today in Amazonia. Using ethnographic evidence, documents and interviews, the paper demonstrates that neither the missionaries nor the indigenous populations view conversion only as rupture. Although they recognize the transformational process involved in conversion, they both emphasize cultural continuity, albeit for different reasons. It also analyses how indigenous pastors and missionaries combine narratives of rupture and narratives of continuity while articulating a new kind of indigeneity (Christian indigeneity), and a specific *politics of conversion*. In this context, *politics of conversion* articulates emergent regimes of indigeneity that postulate strong complementarities between Christianity and indigenous values.

Résumé

Cet article étudie la politique de la conversion en Amazonie colombienne, en comparant les récits missionnaires de conversion avec ceux des indigènes. Il montre comment la conversion au christianisme prend aujourd'hui des significations nouvelles en Amazonie. En s'appuyant sur des données ethnographiques, des documents et des entretiens, le texte montre que ni les missionnaires ni les populations indigènes ne voient la conversion comme étant seulement une rupture. S'ils reconnaissent le processus de transformation impliqué par la conversion, ils soulignent tous les continuités culturelles, même s'ils le font pour des raisons différentes. Le texte analyse aussi la manière dont les pasteurs indigènes et les missionnaires combinent des récits de rupture et de continuité en même temps qu'ils élaborent une nouvelle forme d'indigénéité (une indigénéité chrétienne) et une politique de la conversion spécifique. Dans ce con-

texte, la politique de la conversion contribue à l'émergence de nouveaux registres de l'indigénité fondés sur le postulat de complémentarités fortes entre christianisme et valeurs indigènes.

Keywords

conversion – Christianity – missionaries – indigeneity – Amazonia

Mots-clés

conversion – christianisme – missionnaires – autochtonie – Amazonie

Introduction

Since the 1940s several indigenous peoples in the eastern part of the Colombian Amazon have initiated a process of massive conversion to evangelical Christianity, under the influence of missionaries affiliated to New Tribes Mission.¹ Most accounts of the massive conversion of indigenous communities to evangelical Christianity have explained it as a messianic phenomenon, suggesting that Sophie Muller, the first evangelical missionary to arrive to the region, was believed to be a messiah by indigenous communities, echoing ear-

1 The Colombian Amazon includes 6 provinces or *departamentos* (Caquetá, Putumayo, Amazonas, Guaviare, Guainía and Vaupés). These provinces are located in the South and South Eastern parts of the country. This article is part of my Ph.D dissertation in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan, entitled *Remaking Indigeneity: Conversion and Colonization in Northwest Amazonia*. The province where I carried out ethnographic fieldwork for my dissertation is Guainía, located at the intersection of the upper Orinoco and upper Rio Negro (*Río Guainía* in Colombia), north of the province of Vaupés. The fieldwork was carried out mainly with Puinaves and Curripacos that had converted to Christianity. The Puinave language is related to the Maku linguistic family and the Curripaco language is related to the Arawak linguistic family. Puinaves live on the banks of the Inírida river and Curripacos live on the banks of the Guainía river. Fieldwork also included participating in Christian rituals and services, as well as in events known as *conferencias* (conferences) where indigenous churches from different communities meet together for 3 or 4 days. Non-indigenous missionaries (Colombian and American) were also interviewed in Inírida, capital of the province of Guainía, and in Bogotá.

lier messianic movements in the region during the mid nineteenth century.² While predominant approaches to evangelical conversion in Colombian Amazon focus on how Muller's message was couched "in almost the exact same terms as the early messiahs," provoking "a movement with strongly messianic and millennial overtones,"³ other interpretations of indigenous conversions to Christianity in Amazonia emphasize how it consisted of "becoming white, half-civilized."⁴ This paper questions explanations about indigenous conversion as a simple process of assimilation ("becoming white"), revealing how ideas and practices of conversion articulate new forms of being and becoming "Indian" in the Colombian Amazon.

This article analyses narratives of conversion produced by different generations of evangelical missionaries and indigenous Christians. I suggest that indigenous narratives of conversion should be understood in relation to missionary narratives of conversion, showing their dialogic nature.⁵ Early missionary narratives conceive conversion as a simple replacement of "pagan" customs with Christian practices. The analysis of missionary and indigenous narratives of conversion reveals a clear difference between contemporary missionary narratives of evangelization that tend to view conversion as an individual transformation (not a collective one), and treat religion and culture as separate domains, and indigenous narratives of conversion that consider conversion to be a cultural and collective transformation.

Contemporary missionary accounts of evangelization emphasize that conversion is the product of a personal decision that does not bring about major social or cultural change. In the case of Amazonia, Aparecida Vilaça shows how evangelical missionaries introduced specific "techniques of the self" to the Wari, the aim of which was the "constitution of an inner self as the locus for an 'intimate' relationship with God."⁶ Missionaries claim that indigenous culture does not undergo massive transformation, given that conversion is thought to be a change in personal beliefs, an inner transformation, but not a social or cultural one. Evangelical missionaries usually consider religion to be an inner and personal belief, while culture is seen as a simple collection of traits or things, which might include activities such as fishing and hunting. According to evan-

2 Earlier approaches to the massive conversion of indigenous peoples in the Colombian Amazon to evangelical Christianity as a messianic phenomenon include Hill and Wright (1986). See also Hugh-Jones (1996), and Wright (2002).

3 Hugh-Jones (1996), p. 58.

4 Wright (1998), p. 97.

5 See Bakhtin (1981).

6 Vilaça (2014).

gelical missionaries, natives are able to maintain their culture and identity, despite the changes that take place in terms of religious affiliation and beliefs. As Webb Keane points out, Christian missionaries usually attempt to define “what is cultural and what is religious,” to distinguish one from the other, and leave each undisturbed.⁷

In fact, some missionaries even argue that Christianity has strengthened indigenous culture through the translation of the Bible, leading people to read and use more their own language. The missionaries’ assertion that they leave indigenous culture unchanged is based on a separation of religion and culture, or a purification of them. By purification, following Bruno Latour, I refer to specifically modern practices that create distinct ontological zones which are supposed to work autonomously and have no relationship to each other.⁸ Nonetheless, these missionary narratives that conceive conversion only as a personal transformation, not a cultural one, are contradicted by reports sent to the national government where missionaries have explicitly recognized that they are changing indigenous patterns of life as a way of civilizing these societies.⁹

On the other hand, indigenous Christians tend to associate evangelization with the arrival of civilization and the reformation of traditional custom. Becoming Christian is conceived as a learning process, a civilizing change that takes place in different spheres of life. Conversion, according to indigenous Christians, brings changes in housing patterns, morality, social and political organization, ideas of personhood and community. Some indigenous Christians consider conversion to be a total social fact that involves changes in all realms of personal and social life. In fact, “discontinuity and rupture” tend to be the “aspects highlighted by native peoples, who insist on the originality of Christianity.”¹⁰ Peter Gow explores in the Peruvian Amazon how for the native people of the Bajo Urubamba being “civilized” is not “opposed to an idyllic ‘traditional’ culture which has been lost, but to the ignorance and helplessness of the forest dwelling ancestors.”¹¹ In the case of the Guainía, contemporary indigenous leaders do not see Christianity and indigeneity as opposed to each

7 Keane (2007), p. 104.

8 See Latour (1993).

9 Archivo General de la Nación (Bogotá), Sección República, Caja 216, Carpeta 2012, Folios 25–26, *Informe dirigido al jefe de la División de Asuntos Indígenas del Ministerio de Gobierno*, Bogotá, 22 de junio de 1970.

10 Vilaça (2008), p. 176.

11 Gow (1991), pp. 1–2.

other. The embracing of Christianity is seen as part of their adaptation to the modern world and as a form of leverage with settlers, who treated them before as savages.

I respond here to Joel Robbins' argument that conversion entails a radical rupture from the past.¹² In contrast, based on my fieldwork in the Colombian Amazon, I find that neither the missionaries nor the indigenous populations view conversion only as rupture. Although they recognize the transformational process involved in conversion, they both emphasize cultural continuity, albeit for different reasons. I draw here on the work of Birgit Meyer who argues that notions of rupture and continuity are defined in relation to each other. The break with "the past," as it were, presupposes its prior construction through remembrance and through Christian discourses of the past as pagan.¹³ Pentecostalism, according to Meyer, "seeks a rupture from a 'tradition' or 'past' which it has previously helped to construct."¹⁴ Finally, I show how the dichotomy between rupture and continuity falls short of explaining the kinds of transformations involved in the emergence of what I call here Christian indigeneity. I analyze how indigenous leaders and missionaries use and combine narratives of cultural change and narratives of cultural continuity in strategic ways. These uses shape a specific *politics of conversion*, which in turn, articulates complex relationships between Christianity and indigeneity.¹⁵ *Politics of conversion* is understood here as the practices and narratives through which indigenous communities in the Colombian Amazon develop their "own" sense of what becoming Christian means, and the ways in which conversion to Christianity produces new meanings of indigeneity in this region. In this sense, embracing Christianity is seen by indigenous leaders as a way of addressing the changes brought by colonization and modernity.

Early Missionary Narratives of Evangelization

Paul Fleming and Bob Williams created New Tribes Mission (NTM) in 1942 after being "uprooted by the war from their work with tribes living in remote parts

12 Robbins (2007), p. 5.

13 Meyer (1998), p. 318.

14 Ibid.

15 Historian Keith P. Luria uses the notion of "politics of conversion" to account for how protestants in 17th Century France were reintegrated to the broader national and Catholic society through the conversion to Catholicism. Capuchin missionaries at the time used to legitimate the authority of the king based on religious reasons arguing that obedience to the king was based on the obedience to God. See Luria (1996).

of Southeast Asia.”¹⁶ Fleming’s missionary work in the Malay Peninsula led him to realize it was a mistake to think, as people who lived in big cities did, that the “whole world had [already] been reached.”¹⁷ Like other institutions such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics, NTM was a product of American evangelicalism and “its project of bearing the Good News to the last unreached people in the uttermost parts of the earth.”¹⁸ Both institutions thought the Bible had to be translated into all existing languages as a necessary condition to the second coming of Christ.¹⁹ The fact that the NTM was conceived of as a project that was global in scope, reveals the “world-building aspect” of Christianity as well as the emphasis North American Christianity placed on evangelization and missions. The project of “reaching the unreached” became the *leitmotiv* of New Tribes missionaries across the globe.²⁰

Most of the New Tribes Missionaries who visited Guainía in the Colombian Amazon after Sophie Muller’s first visit in the 1940s shared the idea of contacting uncontacted tribes or reaching unreached tribes. Reaching these tribes entailed learning their languages, preaching the Gospel and founding tribal churches. In her first book *Beyond Civilization* published in 1952, Muller presents her work as part of a “spiritual battle,” a continual battle between the “powers of light and darkness,” though “God is mightier than the Devil.”²¹ The trope of “possession” symbolizes her vision of evangelization: “These people seem like ‘empty houses, swept and garnished,’ waiting to be occupied. I pray that the Lord will be allowed to take possession of each one, so that the Devil doesn’t return in power (...).”²² In *Jungle Methods* published in 1960, Muller describes the main task of a missionary when he or she comes into a village: “he must realize that he is there to ‘possess it [the village]’ for the Lord. He must say to himself, ‘Yes, I shall possess it for Christ.’”²³ The fact that Muller combined possession of souls with possession of land alludes to ways in which spirituality

16 Carpenter (1997), p. 180.

17 Fleming (1970), p. 51.

18 Gow (2006), p. 216.

19 Aparecida Vilaça points out that it was not enough to simply reach “unreached tribes” with the word of God as a condition for the second coming of Christ, it was also necessary to provoke the conversion of all those “unreached tribes” to Christianity. See Vilaça (2007), p. 16.

20 Hefner (1993), p. 3.

21 Muller (1952), p. 94.

22 Ibid., p. 53.

23 Muller (1960), p. 16.

and materiality were intertwined in her project of evangelization. Spreading the Word of God has usually been associated for New Tribes Missionaries with establishing tribal churches.

Muller refers to shamans as “witch doctors” and to their practices as “professions of faith.” The former term is still used by evangelicals. Muller considered the “witch doctors” to be her “chief rivals,” and recognized the authority and power of well-known shamans over the natives. In fact, once they became Christian, she relied on their traditional authority and used it to her advantage. In her first book Muller depicts the “witch doctor of Canyo Iwiali, and an enlargement of a stone that appears to have been handed down for generations, giving him authority to practice witchcraft.”²⁴ As Jonathan Z. Smith points out, in colonial encounters, religion, more than a theological category, works as an anthropological category.²⁵ This meant that differences between Europeans and non-Europeans were framed in religious terms, including distinctions between true religion and false religion, as well as the distinction between “our religion”/“their religion,” with the “latter often expressed through generic terms such as ‘heathenism,’ ‘paganism,’ or ‘idolatry.’”²⁶

Despite the fact that Muller despised Indians’ “witchcraft and evil practices,” there are several references in her books to the idea of “going native” and becoming, to some extent, one of them. Muller recommends other missionaries not to take food supplies into the tribe, except for powdered milk since “it would make them covetous and take their eyes off the Word.”²⁷ Muller believes that it’s best to ‘eat native’ and live off them, taking their food rather than providing them with food as was the case with other missionaries.²⁸ In *Jungle Methods*, Muller recalls how she used paddles in canoes by herself, but then realizing that because she had not the time and strength to do it, it was easier to delegate this job to the natives with all the advantages it brought: “In drifting along peacefully with the natives from place to place, you are not only received as ‘one of them,’ but you save your strength for the real job.”²⁹

In *Jungle Methods*, Muller emphasizes that evangelization should start by awakening “their interest in the Word.”³⁰ This process entailed learning the language of the ‘tribe’ and teaching the members of the group to read and write

24 Muller (1952), p. 123.

25 Smith (2004), p. 180.

26 Ibid., p. 187.

27 Muller (1960), p. 14.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Muller (1952), p. 22.

their own language using syllable charts, following the Laubach method.³¹ Finding audiences willing to hear the Word might require the help of former pupils that “will help you teach the new ones at the next village, and most important of all, you’ll find eager ears and open hearts for the entrance of the Word of Life if you go with a tribal escort.”³² Muller not only trained indigenous pastors and leaders, but also relied on the authority of well-known shamans. In the translation of the entire New Testament from Curipaco to Puinave, a former shaman named Julio helped Muller: “he was one of the witch doctors who had held sway over the village only half a year earlier. This man, who had made a clean break from his witchcraft, would turn out to be my most efficient and persevering helper.”³³

Muller used extensively oral and visual resources in her evangelical work. Oral indoctrination was used under the principle that “faith cometh by hearing,” and under the conviction that “prayer changes things.”³⁴ Given that the first words will make the greatest impression and become rooted in the minds of the natives, evangelization began with a set of “simple sentences about God, Satan, Sin and Salvation.”³⁵ The emphasis placed by Muller on language and the Word, resonates with how rhetoric is regarded by evangelicals to be the prime vehicle of conversion. As Susan Harding points out, “among orthodox Protestants, and especially among fundamentalists, it is the Word, the gospel of Jesus Christ, written, spoken, heard, and read, that converts the unbeliever.”³⁶

Indeed, one of the questions Muller asks herself in *Jungle Methods* is: “What brought about this mass change of heart from serving the devil to serving the Lord?” She replies saying it was done by “translating the Word into their language, by teaching them to read it, by inserting a question after every verse, thus making them think of what they read.”³⁷ If the missionary was not able to communicate the main meaning of a verse, there was the risk of a twist “to incorporate some old heathen idea.”³⁸ Something similar happened with

31 The Laubach method was created in the 1930s by Frank C. Laubach while working in the Philippines. The method originated as a way of teaching adults to read and write in their own language. The Laubach method emphasizes learning through association rather than through memory. Letters and sounds are introduced associating pictures with keywords.

32 Muller (1960), p. 30.

33 Muller (1988), p. 102.

34 Muller (1952), p. 97. Muller believed that the principle of “faith cometh by hearing” was also observed by communists: “Even the communists are working in the “cold war” with their tireless repetition of denunciations and Godless ideology,” See Muller (1960), p. 23.

35 Muller (1960), p. 23.

36 Harding (1987), p. 168.

37 Muller (1960), p. 4.

38 Ibid., p. 7.

rituals, Muller recounts how “these services, especially those such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, would turn into regular witchcraft ceremonies if they did not have the mode of service all down in black and white, with all the Scripture verses and songs written out in connection with each service.”³⁹ Muller’s enterprise was strongly focused on literacy and books: “you send out a thousand fundamental missionaries every time you send a thousand books through the tribe.”⁴⁰ The emphasis on literacy was also common in other protestant missions, where it was “believed that, by teaching the natives to read, they would set them on the path of self-improvement and salvation, revelation and refinement, civilization and, finally, conversion.”⁴¹

Muller also suggested that the realization of semiannual Bible conferences should be done at different times of the year in order to give the missionary the opportunity “to counsel, exhort and lead them on in the knowledge and the love of God.”⁴² Leadership of the missionaries was done through specific disciplinary technologies that involved appointing policemen in the evangelical meetings known in the region as *conferencias*. Bible study groups and conferences should make indigenous churches self-governed and self-propagated throughout the tribes. However, despite all the efforts of Muller to convert and discipline different indigenous groups, she recognized that her attempts could also fail. In *Jungle Methods* and his *Voice Shakes the Wilderness*, Muller mentions that drinking, smoking, dancing, and “witchcraft went on as usual when I wasn’t around. It seemed that reading had become an end in itself and was merely a ritual to most of them.”⁴³ In fact, in *Jungle Methods* Muller recounts that she had to “get the Indians to think about what they were reading,” because she noticed that “with their mouths they said, ‘we all believe,’ but there was no real evidence of new life except for a faint flicker in some.”⁴⁴ The idea of the “inconstancy of the savage soul” (in Portuguese *a inconstância da alma selvagem*) has been conspicuous in missionaries’ constructed representations of indigenous populations that were to be converted to Christianity. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro shows how the idea of the “inconstancy of the savage soul” originates in the missionary proselytization of the Tupinamba in Brazil during the xvth Century.⁴⁵ Carlos Fausto, drawing on Viveiros de Cas-

39 Ibid., p. 9.

40 Ibid., p. 7.

41 Comaroff and Comaroff (1991), pp. 63–64.

42 Muller (1960), p. 23.

43 Muller (1988), p. 60.

44 Muller (1960), p. 5.

45 Viveiros de Castro (2002), p. 190.

tro's ideas, argues that this modality of "believing without faith" should be understood as part of an obscure desire of being the Other, but on the native's own terms.⁴⁶

In conclusion, for these early evangelical missionaries, evangelization was about the replacement of "pagan" and "idolatrous" customs with Christian practices. This was the case with presenting and naming newborn babies. Muller created a dedication service that was aimed at replacing the "witchcraft" ceremony that included "chanting and pounding on a basket all night."⁴⁷ Muller was clear in believing that "the dedication service has now replaced the witchcraft ceremony and teaches the parents how they should bring up their children."⁴⁸ In this sense, the first evangelical missionaries conceived of conversion as a change in belief and a replacement of practices, a "mass change of heart from serving the devil to serving the Lord," but above all a replacement of "witchcraft" with Christianity. Missionaries were very clear on the fact that changing "beliefs" entailed at the same time changing the practices that shaped and were part of those beliefs.⁴⁹ Such practices included traditional rituals and practices, such as naming newborn babies.

Contemporary Missionary Accounts of Conversion

Recent missionary versions of evangelization tend to be informed by contemporary anthropological concepts and visions of indigenous peoples. Richard Johnson is a New Tribes missionary who came to the region in 1971 and lived there until 1995, when he was expelled by the F.A.R.C. (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). When I did my fieldwork in Guainía in 2009, Richard frequently visited the capital of the province to work, with the help of Puinave

46 Fausto (2005), p. 403.

47 Ibid., p. 11.

48 Ibid.

49 Jean and John Comaroff emphasize how spiritual and material transformations went hand in hand in Protestant projects of evangelization: "the study of religious transformation (...) stems ultimately from oppositions (between matter and mind, the concrete and the concept, and so on) at the ontological roots of our social thought oppositions which persist despite growing agreement that the primary processes involved in the production of the everyday world are inseparably material and meaningful. The impact of Protestant evangelists as harbingers of industrial capitalism lay in the fact that their civilizing mission was simultaneously symbolic and practical, theological and temporal." See Comaroff and Comaroff (1991), p. 8.

Christians, on the improvement of the existing translation of the New Testament to Puinave. Richard has also done linguistic research on the Puinave language and is helping the Puinave to standardize their alphabet. The later initiative was carried out within broader projects of cultural revival that included recuperating traditional myths and practices.

Richard spent four years in Remanso on the Inírida River when he first visited the region in the 1970s. Christian converts received him warmly after being recommended by Sophie Muller. Richard told me that when he started his missionary work he had four initial assignments: (i) learning the language; (ii) learning what Puinaves believed;⁵⁰ (iii) understanding their culture; (iv) and finding out how much and how well Christian Puinaves understood the Bible. Richard and his wife started their work by trying to get extremely close to the Puinave and get to know them on a personal basis. This was not an easy process. At the beginning, Richard told me, “things were not working very well,” as they were considered outsiders and were treated with deference. Richard and his wife decided to ask the *capitán* of the community if they could be adopted in order to be treated as relatives.⁵¹ A Puinave woman was willing to adopt Richard and treat him almost like a son, but more like a nephew, and Laura, his wife, was living with the same family. Laura had trouble getting to know Puinave women on a personal level. After a period of frustration, both Richard and Laura asked their consultant how to proceed. The consultant suggested that Laura should find her own family. Richard demonstrated extensive knowledge of how the Puinave kinship system worked, as he tried to explain to me that they had to find a family for Laura that had the appropriate relationship to Richard’s family.⁵² Puinaves use the Iroquois kingship terminology, which differentiates between parallel and cross cousins. The same terms are used for brothers and parallel cousins, while different terms are used for

50 Talal Asad points out that the modern understanding of belief originates in Europe in the XVIIIth Century when religion (and later Natural Religion) was defined as a “set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared between different religions and against natural science.” According to Asad, our modern notion of belief is a privatized one that conceives belief as a “state of mind rather than as a constituting activity in the world.” In this sense, it is impossible to separate belief from the worldly conditions and the material practices that produce it. See Asad (1993), pp. 41–47.

51 *Capitán* is the chieftain in each indigenous community. Few decades ago, chieftains were chosen by local politicians. Since the 1990s, chieftains have been democratically elected by each community for a period of one year.

52 Personal communication, 27th of February of 2009.

cross cousins. Marriage rules established preferential marriage between cross cousins and prohibited marriage between parallel cousins, be them matrilineal or patrilineal.⁵³ This meant that Richard and his wife had to be situated in the kinship system as cross cousins, making their marriage possible. At the beginning, Richard and his wife were simply observing, striving to be objective and to understand what was important for Puinaves. Richard wanted to learn the Puinave language, to know Puinaves on a personal level and to understand what they believed. Richard wanted to understand Puinave culture, their cultural concepts and meanings, in order to engage in meaningful conversations with them.⁵⁴ Getting to know the Puinaves on a personal level entailed participating in everyday activities. For instance, Richard recounted how he used to go with other Puinave men to cut fiber and used to bind the fiber into bundles for exchange. The fiber was later sold or traded for commodities with the *patrones*, white bosses who had control over the labor of indigenous peoples in the region. Richard used those activities to learn catch phrases and common words as well as to get closer to the Puinaves.

Once Richard and Laura gained fluency in Puinave they started talking to people about their own experiences as Christians, “people wanted to hear about my own relationship with God,” said Richard to me. Richard emphasized that his purpose was not to push anyone to become Christian. He did not consider evangelization to be an outward imposition: “We are not interested in people doing religious things, we are not interested in people doing religious rituals, we are not imposing religious ideas or beliefs.” To the contrary, he explained that evangelization is about provoking inner transformations, about convincing people in their “own hearts” about the “existence and work of God, as it is revealed in the Bible.”⁵⁵

Richard’s vision of indigenous conversion was completely informed by the idea of a free and autonomous subject who makes rational decisions based on the truth of facts or revelation. He understood conversion as an individual choice: “they as individuals have to choose,”⁵⁶ and claims that missionaries don’t want to “change Puinave culture and see them become different as societies,”⁵⁷ since conversion is thought to be a change in the interiority of the self, a change that takes place in your “heart.” Nonetheless, conversion is also expressed in outward transformations that are the outcome of a process

53 Triana (1985), p. 35.

54 Personal communication, February 27th of 2009.

55 Personal communication, February 27th of 2009.

56 Personal communication, February 27th of 2009.

57 Personal communication, February 27th of 2009.

of self-reflection and self-evaluation. Accepting God entails a process of self-evaluation and making choices. Once you become Christian you have to evaluate your previous practices and beliefs, and choose to drop those that are wrong or contradict your new beliefs. In this sense, Richard argues “we don’t lose our culture when we become Christians,”⁵⁸ instead we just reject things from our culture that contradict our new beliefs. Put into indigenous terms and practices, this means that indigenous Christians should leave behind practices and beliefs associated with witchcraft. The possibility of leaving completely behind practices such as sorcery remains questionable, as Richard himself recognizes that some Puinaves still “know myths but don’t believe in them anymore.”⁵⁹

Consequently, Richard does not consider conversion to entail a radical rupture, as he believes that likeness between Christian and non-Christian Puinaves is maintained despite evangelization: “Christian Puinaves preserve more of their language and identity,” they are “proud to be Puinaves.”⁶⁰ It seems clear that he is operating under a notion of culture as a set of traits that can be divided between evil and good, where ‘evil traits’ might be replaced by ‘Christian traits’ without major consequences.⁶¹ Richard is also drawing on ideas of culture as language. This is clear in his concern for and effort to learn Puinave’s main cultural concepts and meanings, using their own language.

Richard assumes that culture and religion reside in separate domains, where culture is associated with traits such as language, and religion is considered to be pure inner belief. Christian missionaries try to purify and separate culture from belief as if one were not affected by the other. Nonetheless, it is possible “to tell” when someone is or is not an authentic Christian. Richard said explicitly that it is “very easy to imitate a real Christian, but you can differ-

58 Personal communication, February 27th of 2009.

59 Personal communication, February 27th of 2009.

60 Personal communication, February 27th of 2009.

61 According to Adam Kuper, the idea of culture as a random set of traits goes back to 1871, when Tylor defined culture or civilization as a “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Kuper shows how the idea of culture as a set of traits was derived from the fact that Tylor “stated that a culture formed a whole, but his idea of a whole was a list of traits.” It was until the 1930s when Boas and his students began to use the term culture in the plural, when “Boas did write about ‘a culture’ rather than ‘culture,’ he wavered between describing it as an accidental accretion of traits and as ‘integrated spiritual totality,’ animated by the ‘genius’ of ‘a people.’” This definition of culture as an “accidental” set of traits, is an explicit rejection of the notion that a culture constitutes an integrated whole. See Kuper (1999), pp. 56–61.

entiate spurious from authentic Christians.”⁶² Although the missionaries are supposed not to judge the relationship between the person and God, Richard claims that it is possible to tell when someone has a similar relationship with God to the one he himself has. In fact, when Christian Puinaves have stayed at Richard’s house in Bogotá, he claims he can tell the difference between when Christian Puinaves are trying “to impress” him, and when they truly share similar responses and evaluations towards things. The authenticity of conversion and belief depends on a specific “relationship” or “engagement” with things that becomes explicit through social practice.⁶³

Richards’s vision of indigenous conversion and culture is also shared by a Colombian missionary known as Luis Ordoñez, who lived for 25 years in the region, from the early 1960s. Ordoñez settled in the community of Tonina, on the Guainía River, where he established a school in which he taught native peoples mathematics, history and geography. This was before the state established boarding public schools in the region. Ordoñez holds the view that conversion to Christianity does not erase or eradicate what he understands as indigenous culture, closely associated also with language and traits such as beliefs and legends. “You saw them, they are still Curripacos, they still speak their language, have their beliefs and legends,” Ordoñez told me at his office in Bogotá.⁶⁴ He went further arguing that it is historically proven that when the Bible is translated to a specific language, this language endures more over time as it is increasingly used to read and talk about the Bible. This missionary was emphatic when he argued that traditional myths became part of indigenous *folklore*, “they know myths but don’t believe in them anymore, though some of them do,” according to Ordoñez.⁶⁵

Referring to *camajai*, a widely used poison associated with sorcery, Ordoñez said that it was impossible to eradicate the belief that *camajai* produced sickness. Those beliefs, in his own words, “stick to the minds of the people.” Conversion in this sense is never absolute, as it is always already partial and incomplete. In fact, Ordoñez acknowledges that sorcery is real and has concrete effects: “sorcery, witch doctors can kill a person, we think it is not true, but it is true.” What does it mean to say that Curripacos know myths but don’t believe in

62 Personal communication, February 27th of 2009.

63 Michel de Certeau points out that belief should be understood “not as the object of believing (a dogma, a program, etc.) but as the subject’s investment in a proposition, the act of saying it and considering it as true – in other words, a “modality” of the assertion and not its content.” See de Certeau (1988), p. 178.

64 Personal communication, March 3rd of 2009.

65 Personal communication, March 3rd of 2009.

them anymore, though some of them do? How can missionaries claim that they are not trying to change indigenous culture, while simultaneously downgrading myths to folklore or just stories? Ordoñez leaves unexplained the fact that some Curripacos still believe in myths as well as in the real and concrete effects those “myths” have upon the everyday life of indigenous Christians in Guainía.

Evangelical missionaries saw their work as a complement to the policies that the national government designed for indigenous groups from the 1960s onwards. On June 22nd of 1970, the secretary and legal representative of New Tribes Mission sent a report to the chief of indigenous affairs in the national government. In the section devoted to “morality,” the report expressed that New Tribes missionaries have “helped in the transformation of indigenous customs, in the responsibilities they have before other men, but especially before God and the Colombian Nation.”⁶⁶ In a similar vein, the section of the report devoted to “culture” starts by saying that missionaries “fix nomadic and semi-nomadic people in favorable sites or in farms in order to raise their quality of life. They are taught to respect the laws and other civic duties of society, the nation and the family.” Despite the fact that Colombia has been historically a Catholic nation and the government has given tremendous power to the Catholic Church, New Tribes Mission obtained its legal personality in Colombia on May 23rd of 1967. Six years earlier, the Summer Institute of Linguistics had reached an agreement with anthropologist Gregorio Hernandez de Alba (who was organizing Colombia’s first Department of Indigenous Affairs) in order to “start an indigenist-oriented, government-controlled integration program and train national linguists.”⁶⁷ While New Tribes Mission had the support of the national government, missionaries affiliated to New Tribes Missions caused friction with settlers on the ground. It is common to hear old settlers complain about the fact that Muller would turn indigenous communities against them, demonizing settlers because they smoked and drank. In fact, as I will show in the next section, indigenous Christians associate conversion with a civilizing process that reconfigured relationships with settlers or *colonos*.

66 Archivo General de la Nación (Bogotá), Sección República, Caja 216, Carpeta 2012, Folios 25–26, *Informe dirigido al jefe de la División de Asuntos Indígenas del Ministerio de Gobierno*, Bogotá, 22 de junio de 1970.

67 Stoll (1981), pp. 63–76.

Indigenous Accounts of Conversion

For most elders, pastors and former indigenous missionaries, becoming Christian was associated with learning to read and write their own language.⁶⁸ Learning how to read the New Testament in Puinave or Curripaco was one of the main entrances to Christianity. The idea of a written language was unknown to most natives when Muller arrived in 1944. Both elder and young indigenous Christians tend to think of conversion as the outcome of a clear-cut break from a 'pagan' past to a Christian present.

Among elder indigenous Christians, conversion is associated with becoming civilized, placing them on an equal level with white settlers, who usually depict the natives as savages or animals. For most Christian elders, the past was worldly, full of ignorance, violence and chaos. "My father that is deceased now used to be a worldly person," Feliciano Cayupare, a brother of one of the first Puinave missionaries, told me.⁶⁹ Evangelization is thought to produce a clear-cut break with the past, a learning process that changes local beliefs, customs and practices. Gerardo, an elder pastor of a Curripaco community in the upper Guainía river, told me that "before *señorita* Sophie came here, people used to live with their own culture."⁷⁰ I asked him how their culture was back then, and Gerardo replied that they had their own rituals and dances in which they would drink *chicha*. Culture here seems to be understood as customs (*costumbres*) and beliefs. Gerardo and his son, a teacher in a local boarding school, who was translating parts of our conversation, told me how "they" (meaning their predecessors) had their own gods who were considered sacred and respectable. The missionaries "used to call them the devil," according to Gerardo.⁷¹ In this sense, the arrival of Muller is associated with leaving "that" culture behind and learning to live in a civilized way: "after she [Muller] taught them, they have civilization with this book [the Bible]. People know what civilization is about and know how to live here in this world." When I asked Gerardo about the meaning of civilization, he said it was related to "learning how to live, having a house like this one, cleaning your patio."⁷² In a broad sense, becoming civilized

68 It is necessary to point out that most of today's elders were very young when Sophie Muller arrived in the region in the 1940s. Most of them were between 7 and 15 years old. Ironically, this means that a lot of the elders, as some of them told me, did not understand what was going on when Sophie Muller arrived for the first time in the 1940s.

69 Personal communication, April 20th of 2009.

70 Personal communication, July 14th of 2009.

71 Personal communication, July 14th of 2009.

72 Personal communication, July 14th of 2009.

and Christian entailed material and bodily transformations: building single family houses with separate rooms for girls and boys, having correct manners and being polite, hosting in the correct way any visitor (even a white man), living in communities with several family houses gathered around a church and a communal meeting building, among others. All of these external signs work as indexes of inner and moral transformations.

Religious conversion among indigenous communities nowadays is related to becoming a better person and this transformation can be seen through explicit material signs that include dress, bodily carriage, politeness and hospitality. A white pastor that worked with Christian Puinaves for several years recounted to me once how it is possible to tell if someone is Christian or not by the way he carries his body. In this sense, conversion can hardly be conceived as a purely spiritual transformation, or a simple change in “beliefs,” as evangelical missionaries sometimes present it.

Indigenous Christians also associate evangelization with discipline and following authority. Gerardo remembers vividly what it was like to travel on missionary trips with Muller:

When you were traveling with her you had to know how it was to work with her (...) I am a pastor, but I don't handle people how she did, just like in the Bible (...) She was a *señorita* and she wouldn't wear shorts. She used pants, following the Bible (...) If you were going to take a bath you should do it far from her. Far from the women, like the Bible says.⁷³

Discipline extended to other domains such as the naming of pastors and forbidding “sorcery.” Policemen were also appointed to watch on people for each evangelical conference. For example, Gerardo told me how he became pastor not because he wanted to, but because Muller told him to. According to Gerardo, two years after she arrived in the Rio Guainía, Muller started ‘naming’ both an elder and a pastor in each indigenous community. These pastors and elders would help her organize the *conferencias*. Gerardo was one of the new pastors that Muller named and placed “in office.” It seemed clear to Gerardo that he was obliged to become a pastor, and he was only 17 years old when Muller named him pastor in the community of Cejal: “Obliged, because she [Sophie] was smart, she noticed that I knew something about the Bible.”⁷⁴ Gerardo summed up the story of his becoming pastor, saying that it was God

73 Personal communication, July 14th of 2009.

74 Personal communication, July 14th of 2009.

who had chosen him. However, it wasn't until 1977, when Gerardo was approximately 40 years old (23 years after his "first" conversion), that he stopped engaging in certain practices considered un-Christian: "I don't drink, I don't dance, and don't go to patronal festivities, nothing," said Gerardo about his second and "real" conversion.⁷⁵ It is worth mentioning that Gerardo considers himself a botanist. He is familiar with a great variety of plants, and the remedies that can be produced from them, including those used to ward off sorcery.

On the other hand, most of the elders I had conversations with emphasized how Muller banned traditional rituals and practices associated with *payes*, such as drinking *chicha*, smoking tobacco and using hallucinogens such as *yopo*. People refer to these practices as customs (*costumbres*) they had before evangelization. Carlos Ramírez and his father Rodrigo described how Muller was able to convince people to give up the practice of traditional rituals. It was a slow process that took between 3 and 5 years. At the beginning Muller didn't forbid anything, she would watch them perform their rituals. When she realized people would listen to her, Muller started to reschedule traditional parties just for Sundays and only during the day. Once the leader of the community and the elders were convinced about the Word of God, Muller told them that the parties they had were a problem because people were killed in the midst of these "drinking parties." The elders began to recognize Muller was "right," and little by little she was able to convince them.⁷⁶ Finally, Muller named her own leaders who would also preach for her throughout the rest of the Curripaco communities. It was then, according to Carlos Ramírez and Rodrigo, that Muller started to organize services on Sundays in Cejal aiming to replace traditional rituals with Christian ceremonies. At the beginning, elders used to smoke in church or before entering the church, and Muller would scold them but they kept on doing it.

To some extent, becoming civilized and Christian is associated among native elders with "domesticating" or "pacifying" the white man. Scholarship about indigenous memories in Amazonia has revealed the different "cosmologies of contact" created by indigenous peoples using both mythical and historical accounts.⁷⁷ Pacifying or domesticating the white man refers not only to how indigenous peoples appropriated commodities and practices associated with outsiders, it also refers to how indigenous populations were able to deter and neutralize, "pacify" to some extent, the violence and dangers associated

75 Personal communication, July 14th of 2009.

76 Personal communication, August 28th of 2009.

77 See Hill (1988); Turner (1988); Fausto and Heckenberger (2007); Albert and Ramos (2000).

with colonization.⁷⁸ Domesticating the white man refers to how indigenous populations were able to empty the white men of “their aggressiveness, malignity, lethality, in few words, domesticate them.”⁷⁹ Through this process indigenous communities establish new relationships with the white men, reproducing themselves as societies “this time not against them, but through them, recruiting them for their own continuity and transformation.”⁸⁰ The indigenous appropriation of Christianity in the Colombian Amazon was crucial in this process of “domestication of the white man” as it established new relationships between settlers and indigenous communities. The ways in which Christianity was used and transformed for “domesticating” the white man is also part of indigenous *politics of conversion*.

Evangelization in the Colombian Amazon is usually linked with the end of physical violence exercised by white traders (of rubber first and later fiber) on indigenous men and women. In this regard, Gerardo told me how “since the arrival of Sophie, people live an organized life, they know what life is about, they don’t run away anymore when the white man comes.”⁸¹ Gerardo recalled how white men used to call them “savages,” they “didn’t respect the people because they said that Indians were like animals (...) they did whatever they wanted.”⁸² In this sense, as native peoples became Christians and “civilized”, they were able to gain the respect of the white men. This was part of the evangelical project of Muller. A Puinave elder repeated to me what Muller told him once: “Life is going to change, be ready. Lots of people will come here to live with you, organize yourselves, receive the people that arrive here, but demand respect. People will come and will want to abuse and exploit you, it is not necessary to fight with them, but demand respect. Don’t kill them.” Nonetheless, settlers do not share the claim that settlers or *colonos* stopped perceiving natives as savages after they became Christian. Some *colonos* still believe that Muller duped the natives and Christianity made them lazier. Furthermore, *colonos’* narratives of indigenous conversion tend to reinscribe racial stereotypes of natives as inferior, easily duped and less civilized. However, Gerardo’s account regarding the effects of Christianity upon power relationships between *colonos* and natives, raises questions about Christianity and racial hierarchies, and the ways in which Christianity colluded with or rearticulated colonial practices.

78 Albert (2000).

79 Carneiro da Cunha (2000), p. 7.

80 Ibid.

81 Personal communication, July 14th of 2009.

82 Personal communication, July 14th of 2009.

Christian Indigeneity

David López is a Puinave missionary who worked with Muller and studied in Argentina. He traveled to the United States and other countries in South America as part of his involvement in a pan Indian network of evangelical indigenous churches and leaders called CONPLEI (Conselho Nacional de Pastores e Líderes Evangélicos Indígena) created in Brazil in 1991.⁸³ Indigenous missionaries developed a sensibility that makes them aware of the particularities that “indigenous culture” brings to any evangelizing project. In fact, David criticized white missionaries because they came to indigenous communities and started telling people: *Ah! That is sinful! That is wrong!*, without realizing that natives don’t know what sin is, “don’t know what the word sin means.”⁸⁴ According to David, white missionaries don’t understand that natives have their own behavior, cosmology, forms, values, beliefs and history. In consequence, he believes that any missionary effort in order to be effective should first understand the native vision of things and what a native feels. Otherwise, conversion will remain insincere, and at a superficial level, as people might display external change, while their interior remains the same. Talking about his experience as a native on different trips, David said to me:

I say and teach that we should preserve our identity, so that whoever you are, wherever you go, how many other languages you learn, and cultures you meet, you are still yourself. I think this is why I’m here. I have had opportunities to work in another city or in another country, but I will not rest until the Indian is aware of this. Until he can hold on to the sense of who he is. Until the Puinave remains Puinave, and the Curripaco remains Curripaco and holds onto his way of life, his way of eating, and fishing. But yes, he should have education, he should learn how the world is, he should learn to use the internet.⁸⁵

David also praised contemporary white evangelical missionaries because they don’t say they come to “change culture, they simply preach pure religion, and

83 CONPLEI has its headquarters in Brazil. Some of the main objectives of CONPLEI as they are announced in the website of the organization are: promoting union and confraternity among pastors and other indigenous evangelical leaders, represent indigenous evangelical churches and support them in issues related to civil society and constituted public powers, defend, safeguard and fight for indigenous rights (www.conplei.org.br).

84 Personal communication, March 3rd of 2009.

85 Personal communication, March 3rd of 2009.

that's it."⁸⁶ The idea of evangelization as preserving and maintaining indigenous culture echoes Johnson's arguments in the same direction, but contradicts indigenous accounts of evangelization and conversion as cultural change. How is David able to combine a language of cultural change and transformation with a language that emphasizes cultural continuity and conservation? How can one reconcile the active defense of indigenous culture and tradition with engagement in a process of radical change that is entailed in the idea of becoming Christian? Missionaries believe that it is possible to separate, or purify for this matter, the good from evil in any specific culture. Indigenous Christians renounce the "evil" practices of their own culture that include, according to David, "cultural and physical abuses," without losing their ethnic identity. A document called *plan de vida* was written by Curripaco and Yeral leaders and published in 2002. *Planes de vida* have been widely used in Colombia as a tool of development for programs in ethnic communities promoted by both governmental and non-governmental agencies. The *plan de vida* said that natives "wanted and should renounce" the ways in which their ancestors usually solved disputes with death, sometimes with "poison during the parties, in the midst of drunkenness."⁸⁷ The indigenous leaders that wrote the *plan de vida* perceived their massive conversion to Christianity as part of the transformations that have been necessary to "preserve, adapt, and improve themselves," preventing the "extinction or disappearance of our people."⁸⁸ Christianity appears here as mediating the relationships between indigenous communities and Western culture: "we have chosen the path of religiosity to come closer to Western culture, because it provides us with elements to counteract the most harmful of it and defend ourselves from external pressures."⁸⁹ This confirms how through the appropriation of Christianity, indigenous communities in the Colombian Amazon reconfigured the relationship with white settlers, "recruiting" Christianity for their own continuity.⁹⁰ In this sense, Christian practice has helped to "contain social deterioration as it is imposed by colonization."⁹¹ This particular appropriation of Christianity is part of an indigenous *politics of conversion* that puts into question any structural opposition between Christianity and indigeneity.

86 Personal communication, March 3rd of 2009.

87 ONIC (2002), p. 34.

88 Ibid., p. 36.

89 Ibid., p. 37.

90 Carneiro da Cunha (2000), p. 7.

91 ONIC (2002), p. 36.

The *plan de vida* describes the strategy of permanence of indigenous communities in their territory as a “process of hybridization” that combines the transmission of “ancestral knowledge” from parents to children, with the intelligence to adapt to cultural, economic, social and political changes from a “philosophy of salvation and solidarity.”⁹² Hybridity articulates an emergent articulation of indigeneity that might be called Christian indigeneity. This new type of indigeneity upholds indigenous identity, despite the changes that have been brought by the appropriation of Christianity: “one of our strengths as Curripacos and Yeral, despite wanting to change behaviors of our ancestral history, such as drinking alcoholic beverages, is our indigenous sensibility and feeling, nobody can take it away. We have this sensibility when we walk through the forest.”⁹³ In this way, indigenous Christians in the Colombian Amazon do not find any contradiction between claiming an indigenous identity and following Christian practices. Furthermore, Christianity becomes the medium through which “traditional customs and beliefs” are revived and maintained: “pastors and missionaries in the communities show the spiritual development that combined the gospel of Christ with our beliefs and custom. This revives our tradition in the services, in the sacred suppers and conferences, in the morning and afternoon prayers, in the dawn of the elders.”⁹⁴ In this sense, practicing Christianity becomes a particular way of refashioning tradition and becoming Indian in the Colombian Amazon. The *plan de vida* traces a continuity between Christianity and indigeneity, but it also recognizes political, economic and social changes (most of them associated with colonization) to which indigenous communities have “adapted,” in part, through the appropriation of Christianity.

Conclusion

This paper compared missionary narratives of conversion that see conversion as an individual transformation and not a cultural one, with indigenous narratives of conversion that consider conversion to be a collective transformation. As I have shown, these narratives should be understood in relation to each other and are not mutually incompatible. Each one reveals different elements of indigenous conversion to Christianity. Indigenous pastors and mis-

92 Ibid., p. 37.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., p. 29.

sionaries have appropriated the narratives of conversion of non-indigenous missionaries in order to develop their own sense and *politics of conversion* regarding what it means to be an indigenous Christian in the Colombian Amazon.

Conversion to Christianity represented for indigenous societies a break with the past, but it did not constitute a radical rupture, as some indigenous Christians like to put it. Indigenous Christians uphold their “ethnic identity,” most of them speak their native languages and some indigenous communities maintain “traditional” practices of subsistence (such as horticulture, fishing and hunting). Furthermore, it is important to explore what indigenous Christians mean when they claim to have made a “complete break with the past.” Is it a way of resignifying external representations of themselves as “savages,” and therefore of reclaiming their status as civilized subjects *vis a vis* white settlers? In this regard, Gallois and Grupioni point out that the appropriation of Christianity by indigenous societies should be understood more as a political maneuver and not simply a religious phenomenon. This political maneuver enabled indigenous societies to position themselves as equals in relation to the dominant society, appealing to the idea of equality among all God’s children.⁹⁵ The embracement of Christianity changed the ways in which Curripacos and Puinaves relate to their own past and culture. Indigenous narratives of conversion reconstruct the pre-Christian past and “traditional culture” as “pagan” and violent, but simultaneously the political discourse of indigenous leaders traces continuities between indigeneity and Christianity. In this sense, missionaries and indigenous Christians recognize the transformations involved in conversion to Christianity, but both emphasize cultural continuity for different reasons. Missionaries draw on the separation between religion and culture in order to argue that conversion is just a personal transformation, while indigenous Christians see conversion as a way of carrying forward their own values and practices into the future.

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95 Gallois and Grupioni (1999), p. 80.

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