

# OLD AND IN THE WAY

## Old and in the way: Jaguar transformation in Matsigenka

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*Paper presented at the International Congress of Ethnobiology, Bhutan, June 2014 and the Conference of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA), Goteborg, Sweden, June 2014. Revised version in preparation for submission, please consult before citing.*

“Eu – onça! Nhuh? Sou o diabo não. Mecê é que é diabo, o boca torta. Mecê é ruim, ruim, feio. Diabo? Capaz que eu seja...”

--João Guimarães Rosa “Meu Tio o Iauaretê”



Left: Pascual, a Matsigenka man who believes he is turning into a jaguar;  
Right: Edo-period tiger scroll by Watanabe Shuseki.

### Introduction

The jaguar is the most powerful and feared predator of the tropical lowlands of Middle and South America. From pre-Colombian times through the present, the jaguar has remained a central figure in indigenous iconography, mythology, ritual, shamanism and ethnozoology. Jaguars were prominent in the art and mythic symbolism of the Olmec, Maya, Aztec and other Mesoamerican civilizations, associated with power, nobility, warfare and shamanic transformations between human and animal form (Benson 1998). The prominence of jaguars and other lowland imagery in the religious iconography at Chavin, cradle of Andean civilization, attests

to the importance of Amazonian cultural influences in the South American highlands since ancient times (Lathrap 1971). The first eight variations in Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1964) classic study of South American mythology involve the role of jaguars in bringing fire and other technological innovations to humankind. Jaguars are especially important in Amazonian shamanism: the most powerful shamans of the northwest Amazon use narcotic plants to transform themselves into jaguars (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). The jaguar is even an important symbol in contemporary Latin American fiction, particularly notable in João Guimarães Rosa's short story, "Meu Tio o Iauaretê," about a man who watches his uncle slowly transform into a jaguar.

Human-animal transformation in Amazonian shamanism and cosmology provides a prime example of the fluidity between Western categories such as "nature" and "culture" (Árhem 1996; Lima 1996). Amerindian perspectivism explains animal transformation by reference to a worldview of "multinaturalism," an inversion of Western notions (Viveiros de Castro 2002): society (rather than biology) is the common bedrock of human and animal life while bodies (rather than cultures) are what vary among different social groups, including biological species. Within this slippery world where phylogeny capitulates to ontology, all that is required for a person to become a jaguar is a change in perspective.

Or is it?

In this paper I will examine the phenomenon of jaguar transformation among the Matsigenka of southern Peru. While many elements of Matsigenka understandings of human-animal relationships, and jaguar transformation in particular, resonate with the generalized pan-Amazonian features noted in the perspectivist paradigm, certain aspects of their beliefs are particular to their own cultural and ecological setting. Matsigenka notions about jaguar transformation appear to derive in part from their detailed observation of jaguar natural history. These ecological observations appear to explain the sociological features of jaguar transformation among the Matsigenka more explicitly than any *ad hoc* extension of mythical symbolism. These additional insights from traditional ecological knowledge do not necessarily refute the 'perspectivist' understanding of human-animal transformation, however they do provide a more specific socioenvironmental context within which these beliefs are expressed. This hybrid perspective enriches our understanding of the complex interactions between indigenous world view and the ecological context.



**The Lanzón Stela at Chavin depicting a fanged feline deity.**

## The Matsigenka of Peru

The Matsigenka are people of the *montaña*, the rugged rainforests of the upper Amazon fringing the eastern slope of the Andes. They currently number about twelve thousand people inhabiting the Urubamba, upper Madre de Dios, and Manu River basins in southeast Peru. Matsigenka belongs to the pre-Andine group of Arawakan languages that also includes Ashaninka (Campa) and Yine (Piro). About 85% of their population is located in the Urubamba River and its tributaries, with the remainder in the Upper Madre de Dios and Manu River basins (Johnson 2003; Izquierdo & Shepard 2003).

Traditionally, the Matsigenka have lived in small, scattered, highly autonomous settlements organized around the household and the residence group showing a strong preference for matrilineal residence. Kinship follows a Dravidian pattern prescribing bilateral cross-cousin marriage (Johnson & Johnson 1975). Polygamy was common in the past but has become less frequent. The Matsigenka continue to make important decisions within the household and residence group (Johnson 2003). At certain historical moments, political and economic integration under tyrannical leaders called *kurakas* has emerged, always in response to outside forces (Camino 1977; Renard-Casevitz 1991).

The Matsigenka subsist on a combination of fishing, hunting, forest foraging, and long-fallow swidden agriculture. They grow the staples of sweet manioc, plantains, and bananas alongside diverse other crops, medicinal plants, and fruit trees that mature as gardens are abandoned to forest regeneration (Johnson 1983). Women spin native cotton and weave tunic-like garments on backstrap looms. Women spend tremendous time and effort in preparing manioc beer (*ovuiroki*), the centerpiece of Matsigenka social life, consumed in great quantities at cathartic drinking parties.



**Left:** A Matsigenka man in a cotton tunic with geometric jaguar designs;  
**Right:** A Matsigenka woman with jaguar-spot designs in *Genipa* body paint on her chest.

The principal rites of passage--birth, adolescence, death and mourning--are private, family matters accompanied by quiet, symbolic acts: dietary and behavioral restrictions, a degree of social isolation, and the use of special medicinal plants. Codes for good and bad behavior, though not expressed in legal or religious institutions, are reflected in folklore, interpretations of illness, and many aspects of daily life. Traditional medicine addresses many kinds of misfortune and serves as an arena for expressing and resolving social strife (Izquierdo & Shepard 2003; Shepard 2004).

Missionary activity throughout the 20th century provoked major changes. Catholic missions were established at strategic points along the main river courses, serving as hubs of commerce and points of departure for colonization and development projects. Beginning in the 1950s, Protestant missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) began evangelical work in the hinterlands, contacting and settling dispersed Matsigenka households into large, permanent communities. Although SIL's main goal was evangelical, their work also included health care, linguistic and ethnographic study (W. Snell 1964; B. Snell 1998), community organization, and bilingual education. Communal land rights and democratic representation were established formally in 1974 by the populist "Law of Native Communities". Currently there exist some thirty-five legally recognized Matsigenka communities with populations ranging from a few dozen to over three hundred inhabitants.

### **Jaguars and Jaguar Transformation among the Matsigenka**

There are several aesthetic references to jaguars in Matsigenka art. Young women sometimes paint their chest in jaguar-spot designs in black *Genipa* dye to make themselves attractive for prospective mates. Red annatto paint in the form of jaguar spots is often applied to the face of young children as a way of scaring away harmful animal or demon spirits, who look at the child and see a fierce predator. Geometric designs or spots reminiscent of the jaguar are also applied to net bags and woven cotton garments for both their aesthetic beauty and protective qualities.



**Applying red annatto paint in protective "jaguar spot" design on an infant's face.**

And yet the jaguar is not just an abstract representation of beauty and feline power for the Matsigenka and other indigenous people. Especially for the communities of the

Manu River, where I have worked for 25 years, jaguars are a real threat and a frequent source of concern. Jaguars and other felines were hunted heavily for their furs along the Manu River throughout the 1960s, but since it was set aside as a National Park in 1973, jaguar populations have rebounded within the vast, 1.8 million hectare protected area (Shepard et al. 2010). Because Manu Park prohibits firearms for its indigenous inhabitants, the Matsigenka hunt mostly with bow and arrow.

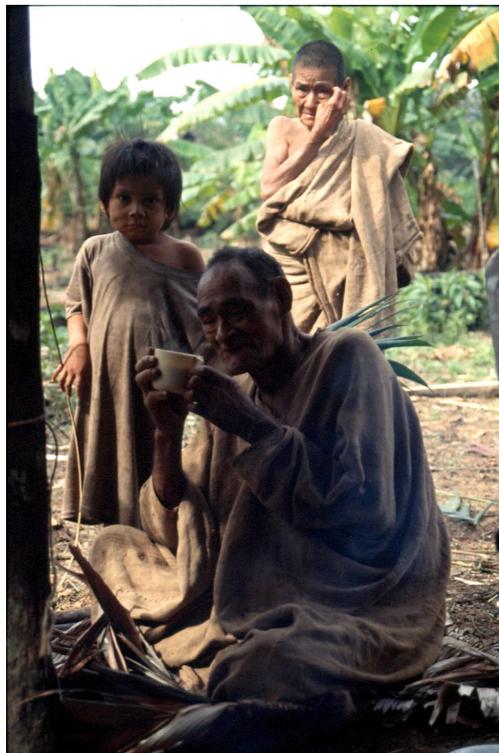
Jaguars hunt the same terrestrial prey as the Matsigenka, and the idea that the jaguar may also see humans as prey is real and ominous. One Matsigenka child was killed and two adults seriously injured by a jaguar during a forest trek in 2010. A good Matsigenka friend of mine, Alejandro, had to beat back an angry jaguar with his palm wood bow while on a hunting expedition that same year. Alejandro's own father, Merino Machipango, a legendary hunter featured in the documentary film "The Spirit Hunters" (<http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/6155/The-Spirit-Hunters>) himself killed a large and ferocious jaguar over thirty years ago, and can still point out the hollow log where he cornered the beast and fired the final arrow. Merino recounts the eerie story of the huge wind storm that followed, through which nearby residents clearly heard the jaguar's human voice calling out: for the jaguar that Merino had killed was no ordinary jaguar, it was human were-jaguar that had come back from the dead.

For the Matsigenka, ordinary jaguars are not usually a threat: they tend to live far from human settlements and do not usually attack unless they themselves feel threatened. Jaguars that are aggressive and dangerous to humans are precisely those that literally haunt human settlements because they are, themselves, human were-jaguars.

According to my years-long observations among the Matsigenka of Manu Park, there are three categories of people most likely to turn into jaguars and become a threat to their own kin: (1) Older people (especially women) who become senile, decrepit, incontinent and unable to take care of themselves; (2) Older men who used a certain powerful hunting plant known as *kaviniri* in their youth; (3) People of any age who die a prolonged and agonizing death, and who are reduced to a state of emaciation and dependence much like the very old: this type of illness that is always attributed to sorcery or spirit attack. Of the three cases, the first is by far the most common: I have been present in the village on at least four occasions where the declining health of fragile elderly women was directly associated with the appearance of a jaguar near the village.

In all three cases, the transformation into jaguar is consummated upon the death of the person, however the process begins while the person is still alive. Especially in the case of old people who are frail and nearing death, the appearance of a jaguar near the village is considered a bad omen and an unmistakable sign that the person has already begun transforming into a jaguar. The verb for this process is *maetagantsi*, "to grow fur," from the noun stem *-mae*, "fur." The emphasize on the outward sign of becoming an animal, "growing fur," resonates with the perspectivist notion that the difference between humans and animals is not essential and internal (in the end, all beings are human underneath), but rather a matter of the external manifestation, literally the skin or fur covering the human body underneath.

When people suspected of being were-jaguars die, they are given special treatment in the funeral rites: the dead person's nostrils are plugged with *taviri*, a tar-like resin used as an adhesive to fletch arrows and to seal the severed umbilical cord of newborn babies. If the dead person should come back to life as a jaguar or other demonic creature, the *taviri* resin plugging the nostrils will smother the beast so it won't continue to kill, a gesture not of grief but of mortal fear on the part of the bereft family. This treatment represents the extreme extension of Matsigenka funeral rights that aim at creating a radical separation between the dead and the living, thereby limiting the destructive power of grief (Shepard 2002a). Matsigenka mourning practices invert commonsense Western understandings of grief, since it is the dead who grieve for the living, not the other way around. Grief and depression among the living are blamed on the ongoing feelings of attachment, loss, confusion, and despair with which the dead cling to the living, assaulting them with dreams and apparitions in the hope of taking more family members with them to the "Realm of the Dead" (*kamtsiseku*). When were-jaguars haunting the village are killed, they are sometimes burned to avoid any possibility of return.

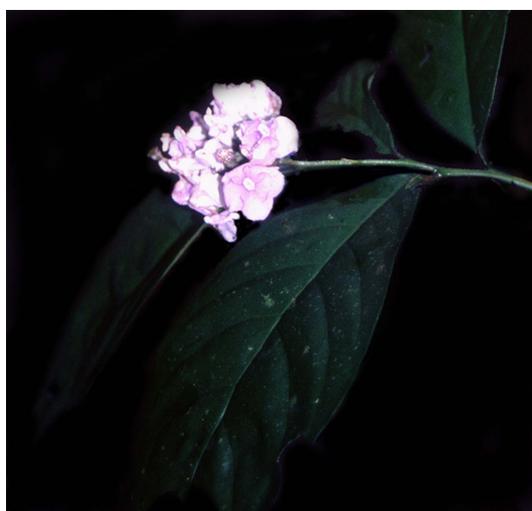


**For the Matsigenka, frail, senile elderly people are especially prone to jaguar transformation.**

Matsigenka men, especially during adolescence, habitually consume special medicinal plants and observe a series of dietary and behavioral restrictions to improve their aim and luck hunting (Shepard 2002b, 2004). Among the most important hunting plants are a group of closely related species in the genus *Brunfelsia*, a narcotic plant in the Solanaceae (Shepard 1998). The plant is known in Peruvian Spanish as *chirisanango*, meaning "cold/shivering medicine" in Quechua due to the unusual form of intoxication it produces: shivering, numbness, prickling sensations in the extremities, and, at higher doses, stupor, visions, and coma. This and other *Brunfelsia* species are used throughout the Amazon for treating a variety of

conditions, especially arthritic pains (Plowman 1981). For the Matsigenka, these and other hunting plants are gifts from the harpy eagle, the greatest hunter in the forest (Shepard 1998a, 2011a). The prickling sensation in the fingers and extremities signify the arrow-like penetration of the harpy eagle's hunting skills into the hunter's body. The prostration, coma and hallucinations the plant produces, which can last for several hours to several days, are manifestations of the plant's intoxicating power (*kepigari*), a quality valued in many hunting medicines (Shepard 2002b, 2004). The plant's noted anti-inflammatory properties (Plowman 1981) may contribute to Matsigenka views that the preparation improves a hunter's abilities, but clearly the cultural conceptions around the plant's powers are too complex and profound to be reduced to any single pharmacological component.

The Matsigenka recognize a number of folk species that do not necessarily correspond directly with the botanical classification: *sankenke*, *oshetopari*, *pakitsapari*, *shimakoa* and *kaviniri*.



**A *Brunfelsia* species used by the Matsigenka as a hunting medicine.**

Of these, the former four are considered a normal part of a young man's initiation into hunting, taught to human beings in ancient times by the harpy eagle. The final one, *kaviniri*, comes not from the harpy eagle but from the jaguar. It is known only from higher altitudes and is considered to be the most powerful of the hunting medicines, indeed too powerful. Though it confers extraordinary hunting abilities to a young man, in old age that man will inevitably begin transforming into a jaguar. Pascual is an elderly man who admits to having consumed *kaviniri* as a youth. Today, everyone in the village (himself included) is certain he becomes a jaguar at night when he is asleep. The snorting sounds he makes and the disturbing dreams he reports are further evidence of this fact. Indigenous peoples throughout the Amazon value psychoactive plants for their transformative powers, facilitating communication and exchanges between various layers of the cosmos (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). The fact that *kaviniri* is considered an exceptionally (excessively) powerful hunting plant is directly related to its undesirable side effect of jaguar transformation. And yet this side effect manifests itself only late in life: for example Pascual, though extremely concerned about the danger he represents to his kinsmen, is extremely frail and elderly and can scarcely walk.

None of this contradicts the “standard model” of Amerindian perspectivism. However when one stops to consider what class of people are most likely to transform into jaguars, one encounters something of a paradox: the jaguar is the most powerful and feared predator of the forest, and yet the people most likely to transform into jaguars are the old, weak, senile and infirm, or people so severely debilitated by wasting illness that they resemble the very old. How could this apparent paradox be explained?

One might start first by looking for clues in Matsigenka mythology. The Matsigenka myth about the young woman Yakonero includes a reference to the origins of the jaguar (Rosengren 2004). Yakonero’s aunt is a jaguar-woman, and when Yakonero becomes pregnant her jaguar-cousins want to kill her and eat her. The older woman warns her niece and tells her to go far away, up into the sky, to visit her uncle jaguar. But the four fetuses in the young woman’s belly distract her, telling her to pick flowers, and she eventually loses her way and returns to her aunt’s house where one of the jaguar-cousins kills her. The aunt manages to save the four fetuses so they fly away as birds and begin plotting revenge. They build a trap by the river and manage to lure and kill all of the jaguar-cousins but one, a pregnant female, who escapes into the forest and presumably becomes the progenitor of the wild jaguars of today.

Though not associated with the origins of fire or other technologies, this myth shares a few common elements noted by Lévi-Strauss (1964) for other South American jaguar myths: jaguars are often portrayed as women with many (often ravenous) children, and many stories contain references to jaguars gathering or tossing young birds or bird eggs. Yet none of this seems to have much obvious relationship with the specific case of jaguar transformation among the Matsigenka: why are old and frail people considered a mortal threat associated with the most feared predator of the forest?

The answer came to me after observing a number of skulls of were-jaguars that had been recently killed or burned. The Matsigenka often comment on these jaguars’ exceptional size. However I noticed an additional detail: in most cases, the teeth of the were-jaguars were extremely worn, rotten, or missing altogether. Though they had not explained it to me in quite such a direct manner, it became apparent after asking a few questions that jaguars lurking near villages are old jaguars, unable to fend for themselves. Jaguars, too, become old, weak and toothless, and eventually give up hunting peccaries and large game to hang around villages to kill easy prey such as dogs, chickens and even human children. It is precisely these old, decrepit jaguars that old people transform into (see Shepard 2013).

Healthy jaguars are less of a threat because they maintain a safe distance. Indeed, when explaining the phenomenon of were-jaguars the Matsigenka insist on the fundamental distinction between “ordinary” (*kogapage*) jaguars and the were-jaguars who are humans in the process of “growing fur” (*maetagantsi*): ordinary jaguars live far away in the forest and hunt ordinary game. It is only the were-jaguars who have an attachment to the village and thus seek out the easy prey to be had in the vicinity. Whenever a jaguar appears close to a village, it is always considered to be an old or ill person who has begun the process of transformation. If no one is in such condition at

the time, an ill or infirm person from a neighboring village will be tacitly identified, if not overtly named.



**Old, infirm jaguars are especially likely to lurk near villages and seek easy prey.**

The identification between the old person and the old jaguar, though not pointed out specifically by the Matsigenka themselves, is transparent in both physical and sociological terms. The old jaguar, like the old person, has rotten teeth and poor physical strength and health. Moreover, the old person, like the old jaguar, has ceased to be productive and able to feed herself, and thus has become a burden on, even a danger to society. The Matsigenka feel deeply for their old kinsmen and take great pains to care for them. However the ambiguity and guilt a younger person feels towards a burdensome elderly relative could have no clearer expression than the fear directed towards the dangerous, parasitic old jaguar. “Growing fur” is a particularly radical expression of the process of social distancing that inevitably occurs as a family watches a beloved person become sicker and frailer and eventually die. For the Matsigenka, grief and mourning are especially restrained in order to avoid what they consider to be the lethal ongoing emotional attachments between the living and the dead (Shepard 2002a). In past times, elderly Matsigenka would sometimes spare their family members this pain by walking off into the forest to die. In some cases, especially among shamans, these people would simply vanish, appearing to have climbed straight up into the sky and achieved immortality (Shepard 2002a, 2011b).

### **Discussion:**

The real question is not whether the touch of a wood-pecker’s beak does in fact cure toothache. It is rather whether there is a point of view from which a wood-pecker’s beak and a man’s tooth can be seen as ‘going together’.

-- Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962), *The Savage Mind*, pg. 7.

In the first chapter of his classic *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) calls attention to how the supposedly magical or superstitious thought processes of “primitive,” non-Western peoples are in fact governed by logical principles that

derive from detailed observation of their natural surroundings, what he calls the “science of the concrete.”

Matsigenka notions about human-jaguar transformation can be related with certain general features of pan-Amazonian cosmology identified in the so-called perspectivist paradigm. And yet our understanding of this phenomenon is not complete without also appreciating the natural history of old jaguars and how they come to hang around the village seeking easy prey. People’s justified fears of such old, infirm jaguars appear to become enmeshed with their ambiguous attitude towards old and infirm loved ones. Though not obvious at first glance, old people and old jaguars can, in Lévi-Strauss’s words, “be seen as ‘going together’” in some way that has led the Matsigenka to associate the appearance of old and infirm jaguars near the village with the declining health of some old person who is “growing fur” (i.e., transforming into a jaguar). These beliefs also tie in with Matsigenka funeral practices that aim at controlling grief and minimizing the destructive power of the dead over the living (Shepard 2002a).

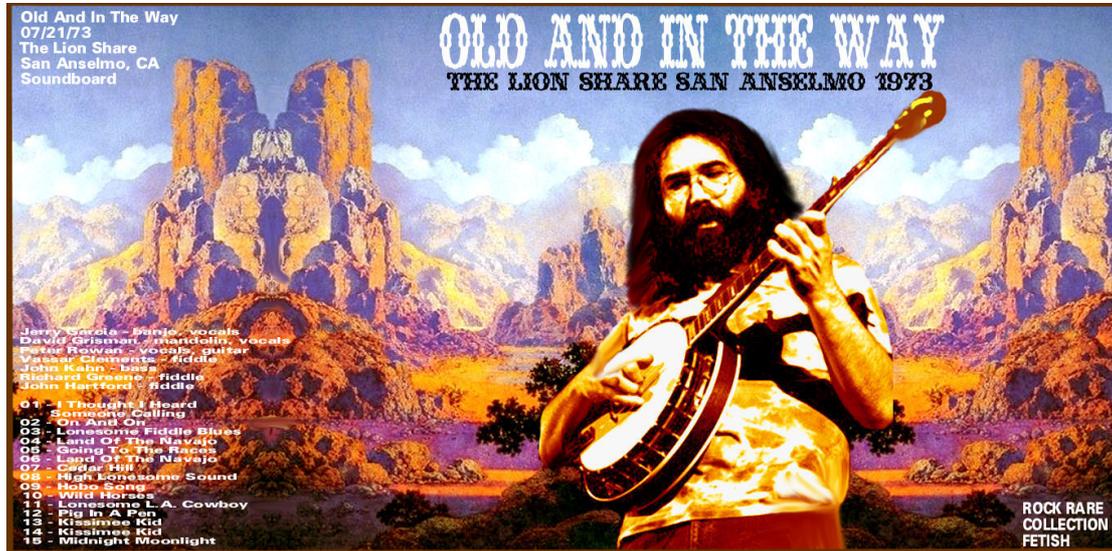
In a recent critical review of perspectivism, the direct intellectual heir to Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism, Alcida Ramos (2012, p. 484) laments how “the ‘science of the concrete’ has very little of the concrete and even less of science.” Criticizing perspectivists’ penchant for broad, generic generalizations about indigenous cosmology that “cherry-pick” the available ethnographic evidence without exploring it in its full richness, she notes, “What [one] people’s jaguar perceives is not what all peoples’ jaguars perceive...let alone the perception of the jaguars themselves!” (ibid., p. 489).

It is important for ethnographers to pay closer attention to the specific ecological and sociological references implicit in indigenous beliefs and practices. Detailed ecological knowledge and even novel scientific discoveries can lie hidden within apparently esoteric observations by an indigenous shaman (Edwards et. al 2009). And yet as Lévi-Strauss (1962, p. 20) warns, “the balance between structure and event, necessity and contingency, the internal and external is a precarious one.” Recognizing the ecological wisdom and sociological insights folded within indigenous concepts about human-animal relationships should neither reduce culture to nature nor vice versa.



**“The Jaguar Shaman”:** Painting by artist Ross LewAllen

**Note:** For those who didn't catch the Grateful Dead reference, the title makes reference to the classic acoustic album, "Old and in the Way" by Jerry Garcia with bluegrass legends David Grisman, Vassar Clements and others, recorded live at, of all places, The Lion Share in San Anselmo, CA, 1973.



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