

MAGISTERUPPSATSER I KULTURANTROPOLOGI – Nr 7

**‘We Are New People Now’  
Pentecostalism as a Means of Ethnic Continuity and  
Social Acceptance among the Wichí of Argentina**

**Report from a Minor Field Study**  
By Gabriela Kristek

Master Thesis in Cultural Anthropology (20 Swedish credits)  
Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology  
Uppsala University

Supervisor: Jan-Åke Alvarsson  
September 2005

Master Thesis, Report from a Minor Field Study, Uppsala Universitet, Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Gabriela Kristek, September 2005.

*Title*

'We Are New People Now' - Pentecostalism as a Means of Ethnic Continuity and Social Acceptance among the Wichí of Argentina.

*Abstract*

This thesis deals with ethnic and religious continuity among the Wichí Amerindian people of Argentina, after their conversion to Pentecostalism in the beginning of the 1980's. The underlying assumption in the thesis is that no fundamental religious or ritual changes take place suddenly. The aim is to look at how Pentecostalism is articulated in local terms, and how important rituals are for the sense of continuity and well-being of the Wichí society. These questions are based on a theoretical discussion about religion and ritual, continuity and change. The fieldwork carried out among the Wichí is to a large extent based on participant observation of the Wichí Pentecostal service, the *culto*, and a mainly interpretative approach is taken to the topic.

The results from the fieldwork demonstrate that a so-called merging has taken place between the traditional religion of the Wichí and Pentecostalism. The healing frequently carried out in the Wichí *culto*, for instance, is virtually shamanic healing in a Pentecostal setting. The symbolic communication of the ritual of the *culto*, such as dancing and healing, permits the Wichí and Western missionaries to participate together, but also to interpret the happenings from their respective cultural point of view.

*Abstract en español*

Esta tesis trata sobre la continuidad étnica y religiosa entre un pueblo Amerindio, los Wichí de Argentina, después de su conversión al Pentecostalismo a principios de los años 1980. El supuesto principal en esta tesis es que ningunos cambios fundamentales suceden repentinamente, ni en la religión ni en el ritual. El objetivo es observar como el Pentecostalismo está articulado de una manera local, y , además, observar la importancia del ritual para la continuidad y bienestar de la sociedad Wichí. Estas preguntas están basadas en una discusión teórica sobre religión y ritual, continuidad y cambio. El trabajo de campo realizado entre los Wichí está en gran parte basado en observación participante en el culto Pentecostal de los Wichí, y un enfoque largamente interpretativo es utilizado para el asunto.

Los resultados del trabajo de campo demuestran que una así llamada mezcla ('merging') ha tomado lugar entre la religión tradicional de los Wichí y el Pentecostalismo. La curación, por ejemplo, que a menudo se lleva a cabo en el culto Wichí, es virtualmente curación chamánica en un entorno Pentecostal. La comunicación simbólica del ritual del culto, como el baile y la curación, permiten a los Wichí y a los misioneros occidentales participar juntos, pero también les permite interpretar los acontecimientos desde su respectivo punto de vista cultural.

*Keywords*

Wichí, religious continuity, merging, Pentecostalism, ritual, healing, shamanism

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MAP

<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. METHOD .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. THEORY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1 RELIGION AND RITUAL .....	6
3.2 RELIGION AND RITUAL, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE.....	8
3.3 RELIGIOUS RITUALS AS COMMUNICATION .....	10
<b>4. ETHNOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>11</b>
4.1 PENTECOSTALISM WORLDWIDE .....	12
4.2 PENTECOSTALISM IN LATIN AMERICA.....	15
4.3 PENTECOSTALISM, LOCAL CULTURE AND SHAMANISM .....	16
4.4 GRAN CHACO AND THE MATACO-PEOPLES .....	19
4.5 THE OLD LIFE: COSMOLOGY, ILLNESS AND HEALING.....	20
4.6 CHANGE .....	23
4.7 NEW LIFE?.....	27
4.8 LAS LOMITAS AND DIVERSE RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS .....	29
<b>5. WICHÍ RELIGION, RITUAL AND HEALING .....</b>	<b>32</b>
5.1 A WICHÍ <i>CULTO</i> .....	32
THE SETTING .....	33
MAIN ELEMENTS OF A <i>CULTO</i> .....	35
WOMEN AND MEN, ADULTS AND CHILDREN .....	38
HEALING AND RELIGIOUS ECSTASY .....	40
‘SPONTANEOUS FORMALITY’ .....	43
5.2 <i>CULTOS</i> .....	45
5.3 HEALING OUTSIDE THE <i>CULTO</i> .....	50
5.4 WICHÍ OPINION ABOUT RELIGION AND HEALING .....	52
<b>6. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN RELIGION AND RITUAL.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>7. CONCLUDING REMARKS.....</b>	<b>64</b>

GLOSSARY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDIX

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all I would like to thank SIDA, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, for the scholarship that made my field study in Argentina financially possible, and the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology for passing on the grant to me.

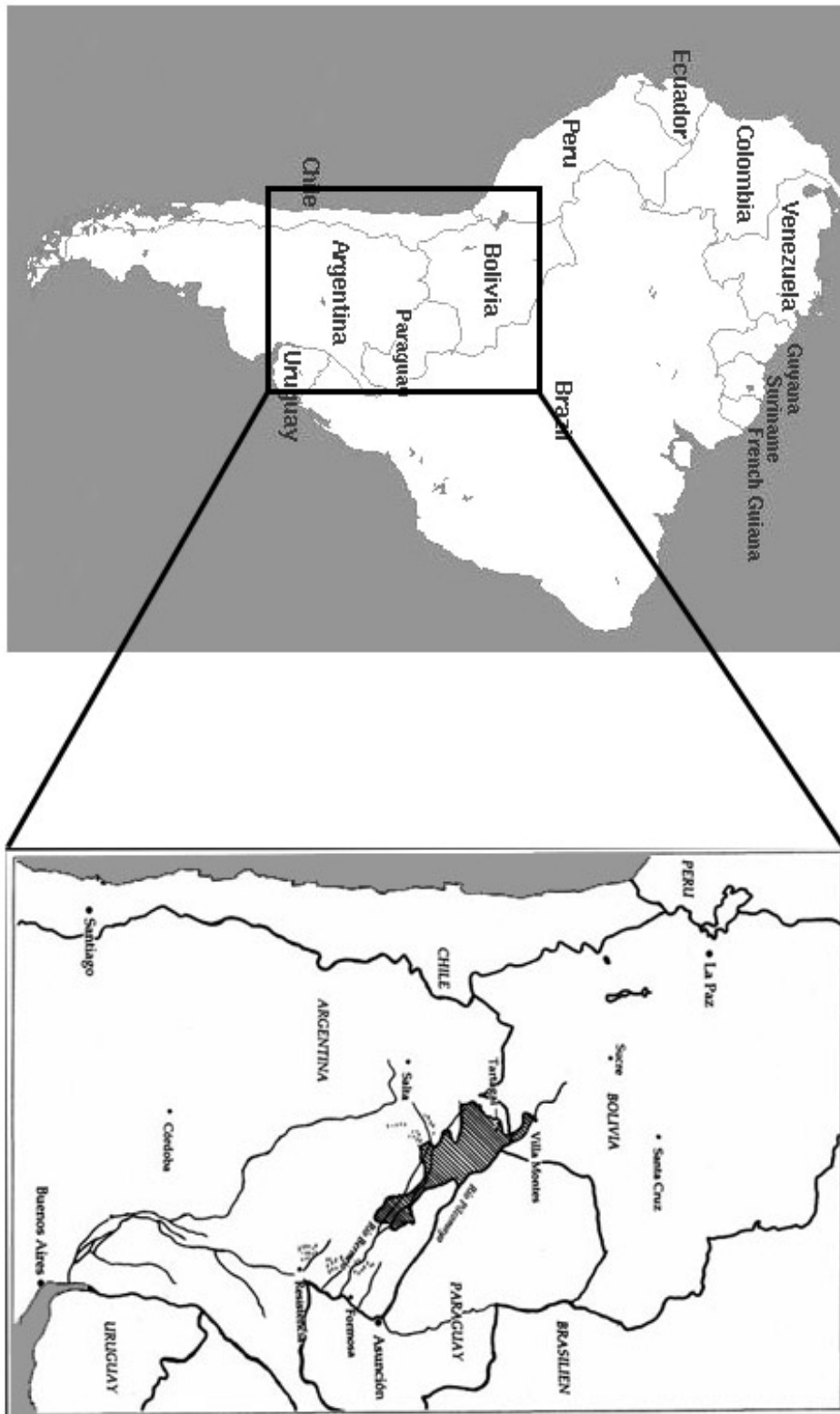
I would not have been able to carry out my fieldwork without the encouragement, valuable comments and practical help of my supervisor in field, Dr. José Braunstein. A warm thank you to him and his spouse Analía, who so generously opened their home for me, even though they had a newborn baby to take care of.

I would like to thank all the Wichí of 'Lote 42', who accepted a stranger in their *cultos*, and all the informants, who shared their time and points of view with me. A particularly warm thank you to Ana Gómez, Félix Velásquez and Raúl Gómez, who let me sit by their fire. They taught me a great deal and made me think about what is important in life.

Many thanks to my supervisor at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at Uppsala University, Dr. Jan-Åke Alvarsson, for all his time and very useful advice.

Gratitude to Paul Metcalf for all his encouragement in my moments of doubt, and for putting up with the heat in Las Lomitas with me.

**MAP OF SOUTH AMERICA AND THE AREA THE MATACO-PEOPLES INHABIT (THE LATER TAKEN FROM ALVARSSON 1988:19).**





## 1. INTRODUCTION

During my fieldwork in the Gran Chaco I suffered from a bout of influenza, and on this particular day (1<sup>st</sup> of September 2003) I had a very sore throat as well, prompting Ana Gómez, the Wichí healer, to say she was going to cure me. We went inside my house to carry out the healing. While we were standing up, she and her assistant prayed in Wichí and laid their hands on my head. Ana ‘stroked’ or ‘brushed’ her hands over my back and chest in a strong downward motion, she blew on my throat, and rubbed a little saliva there with her fingers. After that she removed something out of my throat with her bare hand. The object she took out was a small bluish-purple piece of plastic. I saw it in her hand straight afterward; she was not trying to show it to me, but did not attempt to hide it either.

This passage above shows Wichí healing through the removal of an intruding object in the body. It is a classic shamanic technique, which together with other traditional healing techniques is frequently carried out both in the Wichí Pentecostal service and outside it, even though the Wichí deny the beliefs of the past now that they are Pentecostals.

I carried out my field work in the area of Las Lomitas in northern Argentina among the Wichí Amerindian people during a two and a half month period, from July to September 2003. After centuries of resistance towards the Catholic missionaries, most Wichí in the area became Pentecostals in the beginning of the 1980’s. This raises questions such as: why did they convert after such a long time of opposition; why at that specific point, and why to Pentecostalism? The Mataco-peoples live on both sides of the Argentinean/Bolivian border. The term ‘Mataco’ has been used as a derogatory word by the Mestizos (people of mixed Amerindian and European heritage), with its negative associations to the Spanish word ‘matar’ (‘to kill’). The Amerindian people themselves prefer to be called Wichí in Argentina and ‘Weenhayek in Bolivia (Alvarsson 1988: 165-167). In this thesis I will use the term ‘Wichí’ when talking about the Amerindian group in Argentina in particular, but I will still use the term ‘Mataco-peoples’ (or just ‘Mataco’) when referring to the whole ethno-linguistic chain stretching from Argentina to Bolivia. This is not out of disrespect, but for the sake of convenience as there is no other unifying name. For the most part of chapters five and six of this thesis I write specifically about the eastern Wichí and their religious

beliefs and practises, because that was the area of my field work. It is important to stress, however, the similarities among all the Mataco-peoples.

‘We are new people now’. This is what the Wichí told me when I tried to ask them about their pre-Christian beliefs. ‘But before people here were sorcerers, who healed with the help of demons’ (for example, see interview 9), many would add. The Wichí presented themselves as new people, and they stressed the clean break from the beliefs of the past. Although in the Pentecostal service, called *culto* by the Wichí (Spanish word meaning ‘religious service’ or ‘worship’; ‘*cultos*’ in plural) many elements, such as healing, were taken more or less directly from their shamanic tradition. I wrote my C-level thesis about classical shamanism among the Mataco, and having some knowledge on the topic enabled me to see many similarities between the *culto* and classic shamanic rituals. I am to a large extent basing this thesis on the theories of Roy Rappaport, who has written extensively on the topic of religious ritual. Rappaport sees ritual as a form of communication and claims that there are no ‘new’ rituals, and with this no ‘new’ religions, as they are all based on older beliefs and practises.

During the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century more people converted from one religion to another than at any previous time in history. There have also been great changes taking place in many religions, some have become overly literalist or fundamentalist, while others have become very secular (Segato 2003: 1). Diverse systems of thought have always been in contact and overlapped each other in the history of humans, but a chart of world religions today show unparalleled convergences and metamorphoses (Segato 2003: 10-11). Developments in many world religions show that religion has not lost its grip as a public force everywhere in the world, despite theories of secularization connected to globalization and modernity that claim the contrary. Islam and the Pentecostal branch of Christianity are the two fastest growing religions in the world today (Alvarsson 1999: 359). There are an estimated 500 million Pentecostals in the world, the vast majority of them in the so-called Third World, and the movement is currently growing faster than the world population (Hollenweger, internet), which makes it an important influence in the world today. There are many similarities and a strong compatibility between Pentecostalism and shamanism. In South Korea, for instance, Pentecostalism practices a modern and approved way of carrying out ‘old fashioned’ shamanistic practises (Cox 1995: 221-225). One cannot but



wonder to what extent the massive conversions in some parts of the world are actually ways to retain continuity with the beliefs of the past.

I am basing this thesis on the hypothesis that religions as a whole, even religions that seem very ‘new’, are never complete breaks from the beliefs of the past, to an extent similar to Rappaport’s claims about rituals. The aim of my study can be summed up in the two following questions: (1) How has Pentecostalism, initially foreign to the Wichí, been articulated in local terms? (2) How important are religious rituals for the sense of continuity and well being of the Wichí society? Side questions that will also be discussed in the course of the thesis are: under what circumstances does an ethnic group convert to another religion? And, why is particularly Pentecostalism so popular with the Wichí and so many other people in the so-called Third World today?

To make it easier for the reader, the words of Spanish or Wichí origin are differentiated by italic type style, unless they are for a particular reason in inverted commas. The terms are translated the first time they are used in the thesis, thereafter the glossary is recommended.

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. In chapter two I discuss methodology in relationship to my field study. Chapter three is a theoretical background to the anthropological study of religion and ritual. The following chapter is an ethnographic and historical background. Here I describe Pentecostalism worldwide, in Latin America and in relation to local culture and shamanism. I also introduce the Mataco, their traditional religion, the religious change that took place, and the area of Las Lomitas, where I carried out my field work. A brief presentation of some of the people in the study is also given. In chapter five I describe Wichí Pentecostal services (where healing is an essential element), healing outside the service, and Wichí comments on religion, ritual and healing. In chapter six I analyse my field material, and in the final chapter presents concluding remarks.

## **2. METHOD**

One of the main differences between natural and social science is that the latter pay so much attention to the methodology. This concern of social science basically stems from the attempt to deal with the influence of the subject on the object (in the case of anthropology the fieldworkers’ influence on the people studied), and the consequences of this influence for the

knowledge obtained (Holy in Ellen 1984: 13-14). Already Malinowski (1922: 3-4), the founding father of modern anthropological field method, stressed the importance of reflexivity in connection to anthropological field work. Although popular critique of reflexivity is still at times claiming that it is 'mere navel gazing', as if anthropological field work was just about the anthropologist (Okely 1992: 13). But as Hastrup says about the field, 'it is not the unmediated world of the "others" but the world between ourselves and the others' (Hastrup in Okely 1992: 1). In academic circumstances 'the personal is theoretical', the personal is not just anecdotal, not just a contrast to positivist social science. When anthropologists analyze their seemingly individual stories and identities, they realize they are social categories in cross-cultural meetings. Fieldwork is a dialogue between persons, both as representatives of different cultures, but also as particular individuals. Ethnicity, sex, age, class origins etc of a person become important (Okely 1992: 9, 14).

I carried out my field work over two and a half months, from July to September 2003, with the intent of studying gender roles in connection to religion among the Wichí Amerindian people. My field of study was the area of Las Lomitas in northern Argentina. The methodological approaches I was planning on using before I went in the field were interviews and participant observation of church services in particular and everyday life in general. This, however, turned out to be problematic for several reasons.

Before I went out in the field, I assumed it was going to be easier for me to talk to Wichí women than men, because in the Wichí society work is very gender specific. I soon realised the opposite. Wichí women were in general more reserved, and spoke less Spanish than Wichí men, because men tend to do more day labour jobs where Spanish is necessary. The interviews or discussions I carried out were mainly with men, even though my aim had been to focus on women. When talking to women, I usually had to use a translator, which for different reasons never worked very well. Either the translator would not appear, or the informant would not appear, or the informant and translator would not get on and so the informant would not talk. Alternatively, the translator would take over completely the conversation. I tried different people, who were willing to translate for me, but with similar results. It was much easier to carry out interviews or talks with Wichí men, where a translator was not needed.

Except for these formal interviews, I also tried talking to people more informally about religion, in every day situations, for example, while walking back from church, or simply while sitting by the fire and relaxing. Again, for the reasons mentioned, it was easier for me to talk to men. I had a few standard questions I always tried to ask people; for instance, which religion they belonged to, how long they had belonged to that faith, what the Wichí believed in earlier etc. Generally, other questions would arise quite naturally during the conversation, as why they were Pentecostals and not Catholics, the difference between the two etc. Many questions also arose as a result of actions taking place in the *culto*, for example the healing.

Even while talking to the Wichí men, there were often linguistic misunderstandings and confusions. As a result of this, my study is to a large extent based on participant observation in the Wichí Pentecostal service, where my presence was accepted, even encouraged. Gender roles in connection to religion still constitute a minor part of this thesis, but the focus of my study changed towards looking at continuity in religion, and particularly in religious rituals. The communication difficulties turned out to be an important insight in themselves, as I better understood the problems the missionaries had faced, and how that had possibly influenced the conversion and Wichí view of Pentecostalism. Another negative aspect that carried with it positive consequences were the frequent periods during which I succumbed to influenza and other illnesses while in the Gran Chaco. On numerous occasions I was cured by a Wichí healer, both in a church setting and outside it, and this is something I have incorporated into my study. In retrospect I was actually lucky to be ill, because it enabled me to observe healing first hand. As healing is a significant part of the Wichí service, and it is also important outside the *culto*, I describe healing extensively. However, I focus on the healing as a part of religious ritual, and leave out discussion about it from a medical point of view, such as if the patient was, or felt, better afterwards.

As a white person and a foreigner, most Wichí viewed me at first with ‘polite suspicion’, and avoidance, even though some people, mainly children, were curious about me. This is not so strange considering the predominantly negative experiences the Wichí and other Amerindian groups in the area have had with whites and Mestizos. Also, another aspect is that many Wichí have often only come in contact with white people who were anthropologists, or some form of missionaries. When they realized I was asking mainly about

religion, and participated in church services, I was most likely put in the 'missionary category'. At the very first service I attended, people were relatively reserved, but with time I was given more roles in church, such as reading from the Bible and helping to heal. This quite certainly had much more to do with me being white, than with any personal traits of character. I was encouraged to join in religiously related matters, but I was usually prevented from participating in women's every-day activities, such as collecting wood and carrying it into town for sale. This is an interesting fact in itself, and therefore it is equally important to point out what I had intended to do, but could not, and not just what I managed to observe. Wichí, as most people, very much have an agenda of their own, they would not pretend that I was absent and did what they would usually do while I shadowed them. They would choose where and how they would let me participate. This is why incorporating myself in the ethnography is not 'mere navel gazing', but shows how the Wichí interact with white people.

Finally, as in all anthropological studies, it is important to keep in mind the words of Malinowski, 'it is a long way from the mouth of the native informant to the mind of an English reader' (Werner 2003).

### **3. THEORY**

In this chapter I present various anthropological perspectives on the topic of religion, ritual and change. Durkheim's classical theories about the socially integrating role of religious belief systems and rituals, is useful for my study, and so is Turner's notion of 'anti-structure', as essential for promoting both change and continuity in religious rituals. To a large extent I base this study on Rappaport's theories about religious rituals, particularly on the concepts that virtually no 'new' rituals are invented, and on rituals as symbolic communication.

#### **3.1 RELIGION AND RITUAL**

According to Giddens (1993: 475), the sociologist Durkheim was one of the first to study religion from an anthropological perspective. Durkheim separated experience into the known and the unknown. What we know is our everyday individual life, but our lives are subject to larger forces whose origins we do not know, to natural disasters, social revolutions and, in particular, death. We want to influence these unknown causes of our fate,

which affect us both as individuals and as a collective, or at least, we would like to establish a connection with them. For Durkheim religion was the organized attempt to connect the known and the unknown, the ordinary world of our everyday experiences and a sacred, extraordinary world located outside that experience (1915: 9-20). It might be preferable to avoid general definitions of religion, because it is a vague concept with blurry boundaries, and for the purpose of this study, Durkheim's concept of religion should be sufficient.

Durkheim wanted to show that science and religion spring from the same wish to connect the known and the unknown. Although what he means, is that it is our collective being in society which is ultimately unknown to us. He argues that through ritual we worship our shared existence, that is society, and in a way God becomes a symbol for society. He believed that the main task of ritual, which he saw as the matrix of religion, was to strengthen group solidarity through the 'effervescence', or collective spiritual excitement, of ritual experience (Durkheim 1915: 9-20). Durkheim's concept of effervescence is quite a broad term, and the *gozo* ('joy'), that is the Spanish word Mataco use to describe the euphoric feeling that is created in their Pentecostal service, is a type of effervescence. The deeper ecstasy-like state of mind Wichí healers and a few other Wichí achieve, particularly during the Pentecostal service, is also a sub category of effervescence. In this thesis I will refer to this state of mind as 'religious ecstasy'. Some scholars also call it 'religious trance', but that term implies passivity to me, and therefore I have chosen to use the former. In the Wichí Pentecostal services, it was also quite clear that elements of older shamanic beliefs, and the newer Pentecostal traditions were both present. The ritual was the intersection between the known older beliefs, and the less known more recent beliefs. When I refer in this thesis to the *culto* as 'religious ritual', I mean that I see the whole Wichí Pentecostal service, and not just parts of it, as a ritual.

Many scholars would agree with Homan's classic definition of ritual where 'ritual actions do not produce a practical result on the external world- that is one of the reasons we call them ritual' (Homan in Rappaport 1999: 46). Rappaport (1999: 2) does not agree with the fact that rituals cannot produce an effect on the external world, although he does not believe that religion as a whole, nor its elements should be reduced to functional or adaptive terms either. Rappaport (1999: 24) formulates his definition of ritual as 'the

performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers'. He claims that ritual is a unique structure and although none of its elements, as performance, invariance etc, are unique to rituals, the relationship between them is (ibid. 26).

For reasons I will discuss in more detail later on in this thesis, Rappaport's definition is more suitable for the Mataco religious ritual (and possibly for rituals in general) than Homan's definition. I believe rituals do, or at least can, produce certain effects, also on the external world, which is sometimes not easily separated from the world of religion and rituals. This is particularly true among the Mataco, who according to Alvarsson, among many (see 4.5), do not make a strict division between the religious and the secular.

Rappaport's definition includes much more than religious behaviour. In sociology and anthropology 'ritual' and 'ceremony' may be used as a label for a large range of social events, which do not have to be religious. All rituals are not religious and not all religious acts are rituals, but even so Rappaport sees ritual as 'the ground from which religion grows' (1999: 24-26). It is valuable to keep in mind the difference between diverse phenomena we call 'rituals'; between the stereotyped and repetitive feature of every-day events (for instance the ritual of brushing ones teeth), and the quite invariant events characterized by their formality (for instance the funeral ritual). Having said this, there is not a radical difference between the two, it is rather a continuum of formality, and it is just to point out that the phenomena in this study lie toward the more formal and less variant end of the continuum.

The performance of many rituals demands a degree of 'formality', but that does not always mean well-mannered behaviour. The formality of some rituals might be comic, violent or obscene, as for example the formality of the clowns that have a very important role in rituals among the Tewa, as among other Native American societies (Rappaport 1999: 33). Among the Wichí, the religious ritual is invariant and to a certain degree formal, although in a seemingly spontaneous and emotional way.

### **3.2 RELIGION AND RITUAL, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

According to Turner (1969: 96-97) there is in social life an alternation between structured social roles and the blurring of the social roles, or 'anti-structure', that take place in the ritual situation. He believes that anti-structure

is fundamental to human existence, because it is through anti-structure that people understand their humanity, by testing the boundaries for permitted social behaviour. Structure and anti-structure are linked together, structure providing continuity and anti-structure asserting the importance of both continuity and discontinuity. Anti-structure is a crucial part of rituals that dramatize changes in the life of individuals or groups. The Wichí, who are generally very softly spoken people who have their emotions and manners very much under control, go through quite a transformation in the *culto*. Particularly some people talk or sing loudly, gesticulate wildly, etc; in sum all things that would not be seen as appropriate in every day life. Turner's concept of structure and anti-structure in ritual helps to explain this behaviour.

The anti-structure is a liminal phenomenon and Turner claims that the liminal phase produces 'communitas' in rituals. The ritual participants experiencing communitas together see themselves as equal individuals, who submit together to the authority of the ritual process (Turner 1969: 95-97). Communitas becomes a state of holiness and purity, where wrongs are righted, the weak made powerful, and everyone is seen as equal. Liminality and, in turn, communitas appear in a time of fast social change and in the lifecycle rituals of tribal societies, as well as through ritual formulation of charismatic leaders (Pandian 1991: 122). In the *culto* of the Wichí, family terms were used, people referred to each other as brother and sister, and even I was included as a 'sister' (see 5.1, section 'Main elements of a *culto*').

According to van Gennep (1960: 3), the particular ritual called rite of passage involves a movement of people from an old to a new social stage. I believe the Wichí conversion to Pentecostalism could be seen as a rite of passage, where they today like to stress their new status, and deny the old life and beliefs. Through religious movements as the Pentecostal movement new symbols of the sacred are created and pre-existing symbols are altered (Pandian 1991: 123). The processes encourage the creation of a community, often in opposition to the pre-existing structure. The followers of the movement reject the pre-existing structure, or see it as disintegrating or less significant, and they embrace new ways of perceiving human life and identity.

The zoologist Romer wanted to demonstrate that the first lobe-finned fish that became an amphibian started walking on dry land not to take advantage of a new niche, but as a way of getting back into the shallow ponds where it lived, as it was sometimes just left on land by a drought. It changed its heavily

boned fins into legs to be able to keep its overall life style in water (Rappaport 1999: 5-7). It changed in a way that would allow it to change as little as possible according to its fundamentals. Rappaport believes that this principle, sometimes known as 'Romer's rule', is not just applicable to evolutionary changes, but to a certain extent also to human cultures, for instance; although humans obviously have a different agency compared to animals. Both Romer's and Rappaport's point is that for a full understanding of a changing phenomena, one has to ask 'what does this change maintain unchanged?'

Rappaport further suggests, in the same line of reasoning, that 'new' rituals are in general mainly created of elements taken from older rituals. According to him, it is possible to rearrange parts, and even to get rid of some elements and introduce others, but innovation is limited and it is important to maintain a connection to earlier performance. Completely new and consciously invented rituals tend to strike people as forced or even false (1999: 32). Rituals, when forced to change, strive to keep a coherence with the essentials of the past. The Mataco were strongly pressured to change their life style and culture, and particularly their religion, by external forces, and could not continue as they had previously. I believe Romer's rule could be a useful metaphor while examining the religious change and continuity of the Mataco.

### **3.3 RELIGIOUS RITUALS AS COMMUNICATION**

According to Rappaport the genius of human languages lays in the fact that the words are disconnected from the here and now. This opens up the possibilities to talk about events in the future, abstract phenomena as good, evil, God etc. Rappaport claims that religion emerged with language, and therefore religion is as old as language, which is exactly as old as humanity, because according to Rappaport, it is the language and religion that make us 'human'. The downside of the human language and its ability for imagining, is that it also makes it possible to lie, which animals cannot (1999: 7-17).

Aspects of religion, and particularly rituals, improve this problem of untruth built into languages, and they do it to such a degree to allow human sociability to develop and to be sustained (as Durkheim claims to be the essence of ritual). It does not mean that religions arose as a response to these possible lies, neither do religions provide a final solution for falsehood but religious rituals do allow a more 'truthful' or direct communication (Rappaport 1999: 11-17). Certain meanings and effects can best, or even only,



be expressed or attained in ritual, because ritual relies greatly on symbols that are unreceptive to falsification and resistant to misinterpretation or, on the other hand (or at the same time), very open to personal interpretation. Therefore when humans want to stress their credibility they rely more on symbols, for instance clothes or music, than on speech (Rappaport 1999: 30-31, 56). This kind of symbolic communication makes the transformation of communication of values from one culture to another possible, and in the ritual situation it is easier to communicate if the symbols are ambiguous (Rappaport 1999: 50-52, 54-58). In the Wichí Pentecostal service relatively little talking takes place, most of the *culto* consists of symbolic communication as singing, dancing, chanting etc. This allowed me to participate and feel included, which I would not have been to such an extent if there had been more talking in Wichí, which I do not understand.

According to Rappaport, there are two extensive classes of messages conveyed in human ritual. One is the personal information by and about a specific individual at a particular time and place, called self-referential messages. The other type is the more invariant message, referring to the universal, called canonical message. The latter is not encoded by the person transmitting the message and does not, usually, mirror that person's current situation. The words and acts in the Roman Mass, for instance, where some parts have remained unchanged for more than a millennium, are a canonical message (Rappaport 1999: 52-53). Some self-referential messages would not be accepted without their association with the canonical, while, on the other hand, canonical messages are without force, or even sense, unless complemented by certain self-referential messages. Ritual is not just a form of communication in which two sorts of information might be conveyed, it is a very intricate form in which the two types of messages are dependent upon each other (Rappaport 1999: 58). In the Pentecostal movement the self-referential (and personal), and the canonical (and universal) are seen as very close (Hollenweger, internet), and possibly particularly so among the Mataco. The canonical text of the Bible is interpreted from a very personal point of view, and I will argue the two are seen as virtually identical.

#### **4. ETHNOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

In this chapter I give a background to the Indigenized Pentecostalism among the Wichí today. First I describe the Pentecostal movement worldwide, and

particularly its roots and characteristics. Thereafter follows a brief section on the movement in Latin America, and then the interaction between Pentecostalism and local culture in general, shamanism in particular is mentioned. Subsequently I describe the Mataco-peoples, their traditional beliefs, the change that took place and why, and finally the religious situation today.

#### **4.1 PENTECOSTALISM WORLDWIDE**

There is a general agreement among scholars that Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing religious movements in the world today, although it is not easy to define what is meant by ‘Pentecostal’ as it is manifested worldwide. The term includes a variety of spirit-oriented forms of Christianity, insofar that Anderson (2004: 10) suggests that we should speak of a ‘range of Pentecostalisms’ in the world today. I agree with this, but I will still use the term ‘Pentecostalism’ for the sake of convenience in this thesis.

Most scholars opt for the use of a so-called inclusive definition of Pentecostalism, one that sees it as a movement that experiences the Spirit in the worship service, and practises the so-called ‘spiritual gifts’ (Anderson 1999: 20; Hollenweger, internet). The purpose of these gifts of the Spirit, for instance healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues (a form of prayer without articulating understandable words, technically known as ‘glossolalia’), is not to differentiate Pentecostals from non-Pentecostals, but a way to reconciliation between ethnic groups and classes, Churches and nations. This definition originates from one of the main characters of Pentecostalism, William J. Seymour. Such a definition would include the so-called independent Churches (or ‘non-white Indigenous Churches’) in, what is often called the Third World (Hollenweger internet).

When talking about Pentecostalism, the importance of the Holy Spirit is often stressed. Anderson (2004: 187) claims, ‘If there is one central and distinctive theme in the Pentecostal and Charismatic theology, then it is the work of the Holy Spirit’. Pentecostals believe it is through the Spirit that God’s presence is felt. Although there is also a ‘Christocentrism’ in the Pentecostal movement and the presence of Jesus Christ as Lord is always the focus of their worship. Jesus Christ is the one who transforms the lives of Christians through the Spirit, and the Pentecostal stress on the Holy Spirit, should always be seen from this perspective (ibid. 205). This

‘Christocentrism’ is apparent in the Pentecostalism of the Wichí, as will be seen in chapter 5.

Three different branches of Pentecostalism can be discerned in the world today. These are: (1) the Classical Pentecostals, for example the Assemblies of God worldwide or the Elim Pentecostal Church in Britain (2) the Charismatic Renewal Movement groups appearing in older Churches, for example the Anglican or Methodist Churches, and (3) the Pentecostal or Pentecostal-like ‘non-white Indigenous’ Churches in the so-called Third World (Hollenweger 1999: 33-34). I realize the term ‘Third World’, referring to Latin America, Asia and Africa, is at times over simplistic (is for instance Argentina a ‘Third World country’ from an economic or political point of view?), but with certain reservations I still find the term useful and will use it in this thesis.

According to the inclusive definition there are, as has already been mentioned, approximately 500 million Pentecostals in the world today. Pentecostals are currently growing faster than the world population, and there are predictions that approximately in the year 2025 the Pentecostals will be over one billion, almost half of all Christians, which would even outnumber the Roman Catholics (Hollenweger, internet). The importance of religion seems to be declining in Europe, as an exception compared to the rest of the world, but the denominations which are actually growing, for example in England, are the Pentecostals (Cox 1995: 187). Pentecostalism today is otherwise mainly a Third World phenomenon. There is an important growth in North America, but even so, less than a quarter of Pentecostals world-wide today are Westerners, and this ratio is constantly decreasing. The Pentecostal expansion is particularly fast in sub-Saharan Africa, South Korea, China and Latin America (Anderson 2004: 20).

The Pentecostal movement started forming at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S., but did not really gain momentum until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Anderson 2004: 39-45). When the movement reached Los Angeles it grew quickly, and it was at the revival of Asuza Street in 1906 that blacks and whites, women and men, aristocrats and working class people came together to celebrate Pentecost. It happened at a time when most Christians in the U.S. were openly racist (Hollenweger, internet). This became the official birth of the Pentecostal movement, and within just a couple of years the movement had spread to approximately 50 different countries (Anderson 2004: 57- 59).

The Pentecostal movement has several historical roots. These include Catholic popular religion, ecumenical and critical theology and an Evangelical heritage (Hollenweger, internet). The main root of Pentecostalism is the spirituality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century African American slave religion. According to Hollenweger, the core characteristic of this spirituality is an oral culture, a narrative theology and witness (where the situational context decides the preaching or testimonies), the utmost participation of the whole community in the church service, the importance of music in the services, the inclusion of visions and dreams in public worship, and a body and mind relationship evident in healing through prayer (Hollenweger 1999: 23).

It is difficult to talk about founders when it comes to Pentecostalism, but two of the main figures in the movement were the African-American theologian William J. Seymour, and his mentor, a woman pastor (and former slave) called Lucy Farrow. Farrow 'brought with her a practical knowledge of how to receive the baptism of the Spirit' (Alvarsson, book in press) through prayer, laying-on of hands etc. She knew the praxis. Seymour was mainly responsible for the theology of the movement, but as Pentecostalism stresses the experience under the guidance of the Spirit, Farrow was as much, if not more of an influence on the forming of the movement than Seymour. The experience-oriented praxis that she initiated is still characteristic of Pentecostalism today (ibid.). Because of a male bias, usually only Seymour is officially mentioned as the main character of the movement (Alvarsson, personal communication).

Many scholars question if there is such a thing as a Pentecostal theology (Hollenweger, internet). Pentecostals put, as mentioned, their emphasis on experienced religion and the critique of early Pentecostals towards established Churches was not of wrong thinking, but of lifeless services. Early Pentecostalism was not based on doctrine; it was based on the common religious experience within the congregation (Hollenweger, internet). According to Cox, for example, there is a Pentecostal theology, although it is mainly manifested through testimonies, ecstatic speech, and dance, rather than through texts. He argues though that it is still a system of beliefs that responds to basic human questions about meaning and worth, so therefore it should qualify as a theology (Cox 1995: 15).

A problem for those looking for Pentecostal theology is the pluralism. What Pentecostals have in common, except for their stress on the individual

interpretation of the Bible, is their shared experience of religion, but these experiences are very much influenced by the cultural context. There are even different definitions of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, which some claim is the core of Pentecostalism. The statements and beliefs of 'non-white Indigenous Churches' often contradict what Western Pentecostals believe, for example about the position of ancestors, or the incorporation of shamanistic or other traditional healing practises into the Pentecostal service (Hollenweger, internet).

About two thirds of all Pentecostals in the world are women (Cox 1995: 197). Women are essential to the upholding and expansion of the Pentecostal movement. They take a large part of the responsibility for the church, and often they are the key recruiters of new members. Sometimes women's groups in church have led to the creation of new churches. The roles women have as leaders are probably mainly unofficial in their capacity as healers and unofficial spiritual heads, while it is largely men that uphold the official role of the minister (Drogus 1997: 61-62). Pentecostals see for example the power of healing as a gift from God, and in most places the majority of healers are women (Cox 1995: 199). Further, women in church testify, prophesise, teach etc, and their prophesies and testimonies often surpass the sermons in power and brilliance. The roles that men in general play in many churches are often not as prominent (ibid. 125). According to Hollenweger, through their majority and the roles they have in church, women very much influence who becomes pastor, what he is and is not going to preach etc. He claims that 'the honorary positions belong to men, real power belongs to women' (Hollenweger, internet).

#### **4.2 PENTECOSTALISM IN LATIN AMERICA**

Anderson calls the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America 'one of the most remarkable stories in the history of Christianity' (2004: 63). Statisticians Barrett and Johnson calculate that there were approximately 140 million Latin American Pentecostals in 2004. This is a higher number than in any other continent, even though Asia and Africa are not far behind (Anderson 2004:63).

Some scholars see Pentecostalism, and its success in Latin America, as a modernising process, others as a protest against modernity, while still others, including myself, believe it to be a creative combination of old and new,

premodern and postmodern (Cox 1995: 172). Cox sums up the various efforts to explain Pentecostalism by saying, ‘the Pentecostal movement itself is a highly paradoxical one’. It is, according to Cox, diverse and unpredictable and it will not sit still long enough to be defined (1995: 184). Or as Drogus expresses it in a more general scope, ‘Religions are not monolithic belief systems but multifaceted sets of often contradictory or conflicting symbols open to a range of interpretations’ (1997: 56).

The Pentecostal movements in Argentina, Brazil and Chile together stand for about two thirds of all Pentecostals in Latin America (Anderson 2004: 63-64). When it comes to these three countries, the faith was often brought there by Western missionaries, mainly from North America and Sweden (Anderson 2004: 74). Pentecostalism appeared in Argentina already in 1909. Pentecostal missionaries from the Swedish Free Mission started working in Argentina in the 1920’s, and today their Assemblies of God (not linked to the Assemblies of God in the U.S.) is possibly the biggest Pentecostal denomination in the country. Current statistics show that the proportion of ‘Charismatics’ in Argentina are approximately 20%. In the 1960’s there was an uprising of Charismatic movements in the established Churches, and one of its leaders was a former Assemblies of God pastor. In 1962, Pentecostal mass conversions took place among the Toba, an Argentine Amerindian people living in the Gran Chaco. This led to the foundation of an independent Toba Church, Iglesia Evangélica Unida Toba (the United Evangelical Toba Church) (Anderson 2004: 68-69). This Toba Pentecostalism also became relevant for the conversion of the Mataco later on.

In the Spanish-speaking world, the term ‘Evangélico’ generally refers to all non-Catholic Christians, including the Pentecostals, while in the English-speaking world ‘Evangelical’ has a narrower definition, meaning a particular Anglo-American movement with origins in European Protestantism (Jones 2005: 2887). In this thesis I use the term ‘Protestant’ while referring in general to non-Catholic Christians, except for when I am translating statements from Spanish, and in direct connection to them, where I use the term ‘Evangelical’.

#### **4.3 PENTECOSTALISM, LOCAL CULTURE AND SHAMANISM**

Classical missionaries, ‘the white man bringing the word of the Bible to the natives’, have little to do with the Pentecostal success in the Third World. After the initial contact with Western missionaries, the Pentecostal movement

spread largely through local devotees (Martin 2002: 117). Kellner states that Pentecostalism spreads principally by local people converting other local people, often following kinship relations, as was also the case with the Mataco. This means that the structures of belief are very much influenced by local customs. Pentecostal faith is chosen rather than received (Kellner in Martin 2002: 129-130). In the Third World, which used to be seen as 'mission fields', local people are today creating their own Pentecostal theologies and liturgies based on their own culture (Cox 1995: 215). Segato (2003: 9-10) also mentions the importance of a 'national formation of diversity' as a factor for conversion, where she is particularly talking about the Amerindian people. Incoming creeds are received and organized according to the logic of a particular nation, or, as I would add, according to the logic of an ethnic group. This is highly relevant to how the Mataco received Pentecostalism, as will become clear further on.

Cox (1995: 219) says that for any religion to grow in the world today it has to fulfil two conditions. Firstly, it must be able to include and transform at least some elements of pre-existing religions which are still seen as important (even if just unconsciously) or as Anderson (1999: 339- 340) says, 'any religion that does not offer at least the same benefits of the old religion will probably be an unattractive religion'. Secondly, a successful religion has to be able to prepare people for a life in the quickly changing world today (Cox 1995: 219). Cox (in Anderson 1999: 338-339) sees the mainly unconscious interaction of Pentecostalism and local religions as 'helping people recover vital elements in their culture that are threatened by modernisation'.

Protestantism is popular among long-marginalized people around the world that want to keep a separate identity to the dominant group that is their neighbour. The marginalized people adopt the religion of another high status group, but a group that is more distant, which makes them more independent from their immediate neighbour (Hefner 1998: 95). The Mataco converted to Pentecostalism, and not to the Catholicism of their Mestizo neighbours that oppressed them. The advantage of Pentecostalism today, according to Martin, is that it in this way challenges authorities without doing it directly in a political way (Martin in Hefner 1998: 96). With other words, choosing a belief is also selecting companions, making alliances, spreading one's network, while at the same time building, at least symbolically, an opposition to those not part of the alliance (Segato 2003: 20-21). It may be said that religion

becomes (to a certain extent) a language even between groups that are culturally quite distant from each other (Segato 2003: 18- 19).

In the official discourse of Protestantism, it is usually not seen as particularly important to take local culture into consideration. Nevertheless, Protestantism is still staged in opposition to the nation state, as in the Argentinean case of the Mataco, where the nation state is seen as associated with the Catholic Church and local elites. So, despite the globalizing trend of Protestantism, it becomes useful as an expression for ethnic conflicts with the state. Alvarsson and Wright (in Alvarsson & Segato 2003: 209-252, 253-263) further stress how the initially foreign globalizing sets of beliefs represented by Pentecostalism with time becomes the most local of religious options, as it merges with ethnic cosmologies. The globalizing religion becomes locally interpreted and filled by autochthonous elements. The global and the local change places, but the initial strategy, to help a minority group out of an undesirable situation and identity within the nation, remains the same.

Hefner claims, in a similar manner, that conversions to Pentecostalism reproduce the binary logic of ethnic categories, even though he also says that in the long run this transforms the cultural content of the ethnic group (1998: 95). Martin states that when converted people feel that they have a new identity in their new religion, they often revive their own culture, and assert their independence and paradoxically, at the same time, they start to move closer towards Mestizo culture. According to Martin, for Amerindian people in Latin America, to become a Pentecostal is both a step towards Mestizo culture and redefinition of their own Amerindian identity (2002: 125). I believe that this could to a certain extent be the situation with the Wichí.

It seems as if some traits typical of shamanism (as the belief that one can meddle with the supernatural and that there are people who have a gift for healing) keep appearing in various religious traditions in the world. As Cox (1995: 227) says, 'shamanism never really dies. It is just too deeply lodged in the human psyche, and it frequently survives by wrapping itself in the ceremonies of other traditions. The result is that certain rituals that appear on the surface to be for instance Buddhist or Shinto are essentially shamanistic in content'. Pentecostalism has a notable capacity to retrieve powerful characteristics of folk- and mystical religion everywhere in the world, for example through healing practices in Colombia, veneration of ancestors in Zimbabwe, and shamanic visions in South Korea (Cox 1995: 206). The



biggest Pentecostal congregation in the world, with approximately 800,000 members, is in Seoul, South Korea. The main reason for the enormous growth of Pentecostalism in South Korea, Cox argues, is that it has been able to 'absorb huge chunks of indigenous Korean shamanism and demon possession into its worship' (1995: 221-222). This capacity for absorption is not unique to Pentecostalism, but it does do it to a great extent. In Korea, it is a mode for hundreds of thousands of people to engage in 'old-fashioned' religious activities, for example shamanic exorcism, without being embarrassed about it, because Pentecostalism is a very 'modern' and accepted religion (Cox 1995: 225).

#### **4.4 GRAN CHACO AND THE MATACO-PEOPLES**

The Gran Chaco is a great plain of over 700 000 square kilometres situated in central South America, stretching from northern Argentina, to Western Paraguay and southern Bolivia (Alvarsson 1994: 227). According to Fock, among others, the Gran Chaco is known as a miserable place to live. It is the hottest region in all of South America, and part of the year it is extremely dry and part of the year it rains so much everything turns into a swamp. As a result of the unattractiveness of the land to the Mestizos or white people, the Amerindian people in the Gran Chaco have not been subject to the same brutality as other Indigenous people on the continent (1982: 3).

Some of the largest Amerindian groups of lowland South America, for example the Toba, Mataco or Chiquitano, each including tens of thousands of individuals, live in the Gran Chaco. The Indigenous population in the Chaco can in general be divided into three main groups: Zamuco, Mataco-Guaicurú, and Tupi- Guaraní. The Mataco belong to the Mataco-Guaicurú ethno-linguistic family and they have a great deal in common with their neighbours in that family, for example the Toba. According to official numbers there are 12 000 Wichí in Argentina and approximately 2000 'Weenhayek in Bolivia, but these numbers are certainly underestimated. When the Argentine newspaper 'El Nuevo Diario' in 1988 calculated the number of Wichí, they came to the result that there are probably around 60 000 (Alvarsson 1994: 227).

The Mataco are mainly gatherers, fishermen and hunters, but they complement these activities with simple agriculture and unskilled day labour (Alvarsson 1994: 228). As all foragers, the Mataco have not specialized in any

single one way of survival, but use all resources that are available at the given moment. This allows them to survive on the land, which by the Argentine settlers is seen as very scarce (Fock 1982: 11). The basic social and economic unit among the Mataco is the extended family. In general they count their kinship bilaterally and live in exogamous social units, where the leader's role is more of a spokesperson (Alvarsson 1994: 229). Women traditionally have a strong position in Mataco society; they initiate sexual relationships and marriage, and there is a strong tendency for uxorilocal postmarital residence (Fock 1982: 18). The Mataco form an unusually egalitarian society, where everybody is seen as equal and has the same right to express their opinion and to partake in different activities. However, people having a talent for speaking are highly appreciated and since it is seen as a skill acquired with maturity, older people and often older men, possess a special status (Alvarsson 1994: 229).

#### **4.5 THE OLD LIFE: COSMOLOGY, ILLNESS AND HEALING**

In this section the traditional religious beliefs and practises of the Mataco, as they have been described by anthropologists and other scholars, will be presented.

The Mataco did not, until recently, have a written language, and the way they view and understand the world is mainly explained through their extremely rich oral mythology (Alvarsson 1994: 229). Alvarsson (1999: 381) states that our main source of knowledge about Mataco religion is their myths, which were first written down by anthropologists, ethnologists and others (Métraux 1939; Palevecino 1940; Nils Fock 1982 and others). Myths are particularly important for the Mataco; overshadowing everything else in their spiritual culture (Fock 1982:29).

Humans and animals, the sky and the earth, the natural and the supernatural are all seen as interconnected by the Mataco. However, they do not themselves make a distinction between the natural and the supernatural, they see the world as consisting of different zones, and in every zone there are beings that are both natural and what we would call 'supernatural'. In general, the Mataco live very close to 'mythical time', that is seen as existing in parallel to 'ordinary time'. As a result dreams, omens and myths are seen as highly relevant to every day life. According to their traditional beliefs, a benevolent, but distant and vague Creator is complemented by a number of supernatural

anthropomorphic or zoomorphic beings. These beings do not intervene much in the lives of humans, as long as humans follow the rules and stay in the human zones. If people cross the boundaries for what is permitted, it can result in direct contact, or even conflict with the supernatural. A distinctive aspect of Mataco religion is the existence of 'owners' of different phenomena that are important for the Mataco, these make sure that a resource is not completely depleted by humans. 'The Owner' of honey, or 'the Ruler' of the river, for example, will punish the person who takes all the honey or kills all the fish (Alvarsson 1994: 229). According to the Mataco the universe is divided into three parts: the sky, the earth, and the underworld (Métraux 1939: 9-10). The battle between good and evil takes place everywhere, but death and evil are mainly associated with the underworld, and it is also where 'Aháátaj, the Chief of all evil, lives (Alvarsson 1999: 397). 'Aháátaj makes demons or evil spirits, '*aháát* (Califano 1974: 36-37).

According to Califano (1974: 56) and Métraux (1946: 352) the Mataco believe that a human being has a soul, *nohusek*, and a body, *not'isan*, and their dualism is the definition of being alive. When body and soul is separated the person will die. An important exception to this rule is the shaman, who is the only person that can separate her/his body and soul for extended periods of time without dying (Califano 1974: 56).

The Mataco, as most Amerindian people in the Gran Chaco, see spirits as the main cause of illness and death (Métraux 1946: 352). Two Amerindian ideas about the origin of illness that have been categorised by religious historians are: the intrusion of foreign objects into the body, and the loss of a person's soul. It is unusual that both of these concepts about the causes of illness exist in one culture, but they do both exist in the Mataco society, and according to Métraux, also in the culture of other Amerindian peoples of the Chaco, such as the Toba, the Mbayá, the Lengua and others (1946: 362). The Mataco believe that the intrusion of foreign entities is the most common cause of physical pain, while different psychological illnesses are mainly seen as the result of soul loss (Alvarsson, personal communication).

According to the Mataco, the demons or spirits, '*aháát*, want to destroy the bodies of humans with disease to be able to take the souls and incorporate them into their community in the underworld. Each '*aháát* has its own name and is responsible for a particular disease, and in that way the disease is personified and made specific, the smallpox demon, for instance, is believed

to live in the mountains and have a face covered with small holes (Califano 1974: 44-45; Métraux 1946: 351-352). Soul loss on the other hand can happen when a person has become guilty of trespassing of some kind, for example gathered too much honey, or hunted excessively. The 'owner' or 'master' of that area will then take that individual's soul, and if the person does not receive help from a shaman s/he will die (Califano 1974: 61-64).

The only traditional religious specialist among the Mataco, *hiyawu*, has several functions. S/he defends the community against supernatural powers, has the largest knowledge of the supernatural and knows how to cure (Alvarsson 1988: 133). The work of the shaman is mostly performed by men, although women also fill the role sometimes. For the sake of convenience I will, when speaking generally, refer to the Mataco shaman as 'he', even though the shaman can in some cases be a woman. A shaman makes a living just like everybody else, through gathering, hunting, fishing etc, he is an ordinary person, but with a special ability that is considered important (Alvarsson 1988: 133).

The Mataco mythological trickster Thokwjwaj is the 'master' of all shamans. It was he who initiated the first shaman and later he left the task to a particular spirit, *Welán* (Califano 1976: 8-10). The term is used for both a spiritual state (*welán*), but also for the spirit that causes this state (*Welán*) (Califano 1976: 9). When an individual is possessed by the spirit *Welán*, the person initially starts feeling a strong pain which they do not know the cause of, their hands, or whole body shake and sometimes the spirit will sing and the song comes out through the mouth of the possessed person. The spirit can also make people dance often resulting in fainting (Califano 1976: 13, 19). The final goal of *Welán* is for the spirit to transfer power to the shaman to be. By having the spirit in his body, through the possession, the person receives power. This spirit will also be the future shaman's first helping spirit, called *la-ka-layís* by the Mataco (Califano 1976: 22, 37; Métraux 1946: 361). From the moment that a spirit has kindly shown itself and given out its name as a sign of friendship, the bond that connects the shaman and the future helping spirit becomes stronger. When they start to socialize more intimately, the spirit will give the shaman its song, which is the language through which they will communicate in the future (Califano 1976: 37-40).

A traditional healing session of the Mataco always started in the evening, when the shaman would sing a song without words and with a varied rhythm,

accompanied by rattles (Califano 1976: 41, 46). Through the song, or the chanting, the shaman can call on his helping spirits and other supernatural beings as well and talk with them, while the song also scares away evil spirits (ibid. 47, 51).

It was the trickster Thokwjwaj that taught the shamans to suck pain out of the body in the case of a foreign intrusion that according to some beliefs is soft at first only to come out as a hard substance. The shaman sucks around the area where the pain is, and by doing this he can extract the arrows, beetles, sticks etc that are causing the person pain. Often the shaman also uses his hands to extract the harmful object (Califano 1976: 50). Métraux (1946: 362) adds that the shaman often spits or blows on the hurting area and that the Mataco believe that saliva aids the healing process.

A different technique is used by the Mataco when a person's soul has been taken away from her/him. The shaman sends his helping spirit, or his own soul, to save the lost soul, and after the lost soul has been returned to its rightful owner, the shaman blows on that person to finally reunite body and soul (Califano 1976: 50; Métraux 1946: 354, 362). The last phase in the healing ceremony consists of the one responsible for the damage, which is either the *'aháát* or a 'master' of a certain area, agreeing to leave the sick person alone, or sending the soul back to its owner with the shaman as a messenger (Califano 1976: 51; Métraux 1946: 354). Braunstein states that shamanic healing could also include pain relief by the laying-on of hands and negotiations with an invading *'aháát* where the discussion ends with a symbolic payment to the *'aháát* so it leaves the patient alone (2004: 22). According to Métraux, most shamans in the Chaco cure intrusion and soul-loss in a similar manner to the Mataco shamans (1946: 362).

The individual healing was the most common classic shamanic session among the Mataco, but another important task of the shaman was to protect the whole society. He could do this by chanting and rattling at night, when the danger from the supernatural world is bigger (Métraux 1946: 354, 363). Karsten also adds that the Mataco believe that dancing scares off evil spirits (1913: 208).

#### **4.6 CHANGE**

As mentioned earlier, the Amerindian people in the Gran Chaco were left by colonizers in relative peace until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This changed in the 1920's

when there were rumours about great oil deposits in the Chaco that eventually led to the so-called Chaco War (1932-1936) between Paraguay and Bolivia. The army occupied parts of Mataco territory, and many Mataco were transferred to large camps, which they were not allowed to leave. In the wake of the war, several epidemics of smallpox followed, killing about 30-40 percent of the Mataco population (Alvarsson 1988: 29-30). The Wichí in Argentina suffered the consequences of the war less than the 'Weenhayek in Bolivia, but all of the Gran Chaco was affected to an extent by the war. Today the Mataco have lost part of their land to cattle farmers, and many have moved closer to Mestizo towns. Generally the Mataco have become more incorporated into the Bolivian/Argentinean society with its health care, education system etc, where they are heavily discriminated. Still the Mataco have maintained a lesser degree of assimilation than the other Amerindian peoples in the area. Today the vast majority of the Mataco do not have a permanent job outside the missions and bilingual school project, and no Mataco is a Roman Catholic (Alvarsson 2003: 224).

During the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries numerous efforts were made by the Catholic missionaries to evangelize the Mataco peoples, although most of the attempts were short lived. The Mataco have been seen as the Amerindian traditionalists in the area. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were persecuted because of their resistance to Catholicism and 'civilization'. Mataco shamans were harassed and often arrested. Traditional religious ceremonies were officially forbidden, but despite all this the Mataco still did not convert to Catholicism (Alvarsson 2003: 223-224).

In 1914 the South American Missionary Society of the Anglican Church set up a mission in the Gran Chaco (Braunstein 2004: 31). The Anglican Church consisted mainly of Englishmen, who, because of their friendliness towards the Amerindian people, were looked upon more positively than other whites by the Wichí (Alvarsson 2003: 224-225). In the early 1900's other Western missionaries also appeared in the Gran Chaco, mainly from Sweden and Norway. The first Norwegian missionary arrived to the Gran Chaco in 1910, and the first group of Swedes did so in 1921 and they were both perceived in the same positive category by the locals (or at least more positive than the other whites) as were the English Anglicans (Alvarsson 2003: 225). Something that separated the Scandinavian missionaries from the North American Pentecostals (that also appeared later in the Gran Chaco), was the

former's stress on anti-authoritarian tendencies in the movement. It was a movement that viewed it as important to challenge authorities, and in their Church work they saw popular participation of a type of 'generalized priesthood' as vital (Alvarsson 2003: 226).

The first four decades of missionary work among the Mataco, carried out mainly by the Anglicans, meant a very Western religious expression, which led to extremely few conversions. Then, during the following two decades, starting in the 1950's, there was an increasingly personal religious expression, largely in the Anglican Church, in form as well as in liturgy, among the majority of the Mataco (Alvarsson 2003: 236-237). Christian concepts were translated into different Mataco dialects, and new Western and Christian beliefs were slowly integrated into the traditional Amerindian cosmos and the religious ideas of the missionaries were interpreted and reinterpreted to fit in with the Mataco cosmos and way of thinking (Alvarsson 2003: 236-237; Braunstein 2004: 31).

In the beginning of the 1970's a religious movement called the 'Asamblea de Dios' (Assembly of God) originated from the Swedish Pentecostal Mission in the Gran Chaco. The new mode of worship included religious ecstasy, glossolalia and healing, which was an extreme break with the solemnity of the Anglican Church, and it was a change that linked Christianity and shamanism together in a more successful way than the Anglican Church had done. The new movement was spread by inspired Wichí preachers, and it gained many supporters, but these local religious outbursts died out quickly (Braunstein 2004: 32).

In the early 1980's a related religious movement broke out among the Wichí- the Iglesia Evangélica Unida (United Evangelical Church). It was a 'salvation movement' that had started in the south and central Chaco relatively spontaneously among the Guaycuruan peoples after the closure of the Mennonite missions there, spreading to other Amerindian groups such as the Toba, and later the Wichí (particularly the eastern Wichí). The leader of this new movement among the Wichí was Pablo Rojas, also known as Zapallo (meaning the vegetable squash). He was a Wichí Pentecostal prophet, who had been in contact with the Iglesia Evangélica Unida in the province of Gran Chaco where he had Toba relatives. It was a Church that stressed the charismatic trends that were actually rising in the Anglican Church as well. The movement that was called the 'Church of the Squashes' originated from

near the town of Carboncito (Western Gran Chaco), where the Anglican Church was running an agricultural project. However, after the failure of the project the movement dispersed and fragmented into isolated splinter groups (Braunstein 2004: 33).

While the representatives of the Anglican Church have departed, partially as a result of political conflict between Argentina and the United Kingdom, different Protestant Churches have become more popular. This had led to a shift of leadership, and a formalization of links of the Wichí Church with the Church of other Amerindian groups as the Toba and Pilagá (Braunstein 2004: 33-34). In the 1980's the Wichí started holding the position of pastor in Church, while before they had only had the role of *encargado* ('administrator'), assistants to the regular Western pastor. Despite the fragmentation, the Pentecostal Church became a majority Church for the Mataco, in the 1970's or 1980's, depending on the area, from being a minority movement before (Alvarsson 2003: 234-236). It is difficult to give an exact figure for the amount of Wichí converts, but Alvarsson's estimate is that approximately 80-90 percent of the 'Weenhayek are Pentecostals today, and according to him, the situation is probably similar among the Wichí (Alvarsson, personal communication). I believe this could be a reasonable estimate for the area where I carried out my field work as well. I am basing this opinion on the number of Wichí participating in church, and expressing their belief in Jesus. Many Wichí also talk about non-Christian Wichí as *brujos* ('sorcerers'), and they seem to consider it an exception to the norm of the Pentecostal Wichí.

To the question who brought the word of Jesus to the area of Las Lomitas, Simón Sarmiento, a Wichí pastor told me (interview 10):

Somebody called López got here in 1981, and people from Norway, but they only got to [area] 47. Before then we did not know the word of Jesus. The Pentecostals were the first ones here though. Before the year 1981 there was another Church, the Catholic Church, and Lila, but then people did not believe, and there were *brujos*.

A Catholic nun from Buenos Aires, Lila, has lived in Las Lomitas for at least 30 years. I got the impression that she was well-liked by the Wichí because of her friendliness, but even so, Simón claims, 'the Wichí did not want to become Catholics, because they did not know the Catholics. People



slowly started going to church, and in 1982 many Wichí were baptized close to the mill, and they entered the Iglesia Unida'. Several group baptisms of the Wichí took place in the area of Las Lomitas in the early 1980's, although there are no documented sources on when exactly they took place and how many persons were baptised. However, many Wichí seem to mention the year 1982, as does Simón above. José Braunstein, an anthropologist who has lived in the area of Las Lomitas for almost 30 years, and also my supervisor in field, refers to the same time period regarding the baptism of the Wichí (personal communication).

Discussing what the difference is between Evangelicals and Catholics, Félix Velásquez said (interview 7), 'those who believe in Jesus call themselves Evangelicals, and the others Catholics. The Catholics just stand there, they do not move, and only the minister speaks'. He adds that there is only one God. Abel Sarmiento answers (interview 9) the same question saying, 'the difference between Catholics and Evangelicals is that the Evangelicals are better because they do not worship images'. He points out that it says in the Bible, in the book of Matthew, not to use images in church.

#### **4.7 A NEW LIFE?**

In section 4.5 the traditional beliefs and practises of the Mataco were presented. Because of the influence by the national society and the work of the missionaries, some changes have taken place in the sphere of religion; the shamans, for instance, have lost most of their spiritual authority. Today the shamans are socially marginalized, many people are still afraid of them, but they are rarely consulted. It is a paradox, but after the religious conversions in the 1970's and 1980's Mestizos went to shamans to be healed more often than Amerindian people (Alvarsson 1988: 134). Most of the shamanistic curing rituals, the shamanistic teachings, and the ceremonial dances have been substituted by Pentecostal meetings with singing, prayer etc (Alvarsson 1994-229). The most common spiritual leader among the Mataco today, often overlapping with the role of the pastor, is called *lhametwo*, meaning 'the keeper of the word', the person responsible for reading the Bible. There are clear similarities between the traditional shaman and the *lhametwo*: they both fish, gather food etc as everybody else in the community (their religious role is not a full-time job); they both have access to supernatural knowledge that allows them to speak of the unknown and the future; and they both perform

healing rituals. It seems as if the *lhametwo* is taking over some of the old functions of the shaman (Alvarsson 1988: 134-135).

Many religions of Amerindian people do not, as a contrast to the religions of the colonizers, conceive of a moral common good. Instead these religions strive to make the world understandable and bearable. These kinds of religions do not claim to have an exclusive control over spiritual values. This is also true of the largely inclusive beliefs of the Wichí. Perhaps this explains the ease with which these societies often accept incoming Christian symbols (Segato 2003: 16- 17).

I find ‘merging’ a useful term to describe the result of the meeting of Pentecostalism and the religion of Amerindian people. Merging could be seen as ‘a conscious or unconscious fusion of two sets of religious values and traditions, in which individual phenomena may be substituted, interposed, or exists side by side without being labelled as pertaining to one tradition or the other’ (Alvarsson 2003: 240-241). Compared to the more negative term of syncretism, also meaning a fusion of different beliefs, but implying a ‘distortion of Christianity’, merging entails a more complex cosmology, where the basics from the original religion are complemented by main features of the new religion (Alvarsson 1999: 380). A crucial prerequisite for merging is that the new belief does not contradict central values in the old belief (Alvarsson 1999: 372). Merging would be impossible without a certain kind of ‘compatibility’ between the two systems. This compatibility between Pentecostal and Amerindian cosmologies is manifested in several ways (Alvarsson 2003: 241-244). In the case of the Mataco, the main similarities between their traditional beliefs and Pentecostalism consist of both religions having a cosmos divided in three parts, one main ‘good God and creator’, a belief in a ‘separate reality’ as contrasted to the material every day reality, and a belief in a Holy Spirit or Helping Spirits, and the possibility of becoming possessed by them (Alvarsson 1999: 375; Alvarsson 2003: 241-244). Further compatibility between the two is the element of counter culture in Pentecostalism, which suits the Mataco, who want to ‘protest’, in a subtle way at least, against the Mestizo society.

One of the most obvious results of the conversion is the new official discourse taking place in all conversions. In the case of the Wichí, power words are taken from the lingua franca, which is Spanish (Alvarsson 1999: 383), and they are frequently used during the *culto* and healing. Through the

conversion to Pentecostalism the quiet and timid obtain the strong and powerful speech of the Bible, with its characteristic language. According to Martin, different marginalized groups, in this case the Mataco, read the Bible independently and know it as the truth. When they can speak for themselves they can also speak for their people (Martin 2002: 127). Converted Pentecostals often stress the change and the 'new life' they have gained through their new religion, and so they also tend to see the beliefs of the past as 'bad' or 'ungodly', or they might even deny they had any previous religious beliefs (Martin 2002: 72). This will be shown in later interviews with the Wichí.

The conversion also creates a closeness between the converted and the missionary, as a result of the spiritual experiences they share (or at least in the same spiritual context). The missionary becomes an important ally and helps the Mataco network to expand (Alvarsson 1999: 385). Further results of the conversion is *gozo* in the Pentecostal service, healing (without being worried for persecution because of it), and, according to Alvarsson, release from alcohol and tobacco (Alvarsson 2003:244-246; 1999: 381). Another important result of the conversion is the access to spiritual knowledge and power to all the Mataco (and not just the shaman, as earlier) through Pentecostalism and the Holy Spirit (Alvarsson 2003: 244-246).

#### **4.8 LAS LOMITAS AND DIVERSE RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS**

The town of Las Lomitas, of about 12 000 inhabitants, is situated in the central Gran Chaco, in Argentina. It is part of a string of small towns that lay spaced out along what is largely a dirt road that crosses the Gran Chaco in a south-east to north-west direction. The closest city is Formosa, (more than 300 000 inhabitants) about 300 kilometres south-east of Las Lomitas, which takes approximately 6 hours by bus. The Wichí living in the area of Las Lomitas make up the most southern-eastern fringe of the entire Mataco territory, and they share the area with other Amerindian groups, mainly the Toba and the Pilagá. Most of the Wichí living in the area of the town have moved there relatively recently, in the last generation or so, many of them from different locations near the river Bermejo. They moved because of worsened circumstances in their old territories, caused largely by deforestation and extension of Mestizo cattle farmers, but also because of the day labour opportunities and the goods available in town, such as flour and sugar.

The region of Formosa, which includes Las Lomitas, is the poorest Argentine county. In Argentina in general, around 90 percent of the population is classified as 'white', that is of European descent. In Las Lomitas (and the situation is similar in most of the Gran Chaco) there were few white people, around 80-90 percent are Mestizos, and the rest are seen by themselves and others as 'purely' Amerindian. Most Mestizos themselves will deny that they most likely have Amerindian ancestors. The Mestizos live mainly in the actual town of Las Lomitas, and the different Amerindian groups, including the Mataco, live predominantly outside or on the outskirts of the town. As in other places of the Gran Chaco, and most parts of Latin America, the relationship between the Mestizos and the Amerindian population in Las Lomitas is not very good. The Mestizos in general hold the political and economic power while the Amerindian people are as a rule discriminated. Mestizos and Amerindian people view each other respectively as 'non-people', and when they meet they ignore each other as much as it is practically possible. Several times when I walked to town with a group of Wichí women, a Mestizo we met on the way would greet only me, and would demonstratively not look at, nor recognise, the Wichí I was with.

Despite its small size and relative isolation, Las Lomitas is a religious meeting place, where Mestizo Catholicism, traditional Amerindian religions, and the comparatively new Anglican and Pentecostal Churches exist side by side. In this thesis I will examine one aspect of that religious pluralism, namely the merging of Amerindian religion and Pentecostalism.

The Wichí Pentecostal Churches in the area of Las Lomitas started as branches of the Iglesia Evangélica Unida. These splinter groups were created around a local pastor or leader, who in a vision had been ordered to build a church. It often happens that a recently built church becomes the focal point of a local religious revival, and then becomes abandoned after only some months. A deserted church building is a symbol of the lost prestige of the founder (Braunstein 2004: 33).

'Lote 42' is a Wichí community consisting of about 100-150 persons, approximately 6 kilometres south of Las Lomitas. It was where I carried out my field work. There were two Pentecostal pastors, both Wichí men in the community, and at the time of my fieldwork they were both in the process of building their own respective church. The most famous healer and prophet in the area however was neither of the pastors, but a Wichí woman called Ana

Gómez. Ana is about 60-65 years old, and she lives with her two grown sons, Félix and Raúl. Both her sons are her assistants in healing. Félix helps her to heal in the *culto*, where he is very active as a speaker as well. I never saw Raúl heal in church, but in the *culto* he is one of the musicians. Raúl is approximately 25-30 years old, he is married and he and his wife Rosa have four children. Félix, who is a few years older than his brother, actually got married during the time I was in Las Lomitas (but when I came to visit six months later he was not living with his wife any more). It was mainly Ana, but also her sons, who I was interested in during my study because of their prominent roles in religious life. During the two and a half months of my field work I stayed with Ana and her family (living in a tent outside their hut) for about half the time. The rest of the time I lived, for different practical reasons, mainly related to my health, in the town of Las Lomitas, bicycling to Lote 42 almost every day.

As mentioned above, there were two pastors in the community 'Lote 42'. One of them, Simón Sarmiento, organized the majority of the *cultos* at the time. Simón belongs to the denomination Iglesia Evangélica Buenas Nuevas (Evangelical Church Buenas Nuevas). The other pastor was Nazarito (I never found out his full name), who was said was to be the leader of the community '42', even though I never noticed this manifested in any way. Nazarito belonged to the denomination Iglesia Evangélica Unida. I was told, by Félix, among others, that most Wichí in '42', like Simón, belong to Buenas Nuevas (as Iglesia Evangélica Buenas Nuevas was called in everyday speech). Simón told me (interview 4):

I and many persons here used to belong to Iglesia Unida, which many Pilagá belong to, but the secretary of Iglesia Unida never came with the license [for Simón to work officially as a pastor]. The Toba and the Pilagá have the same religion as the Wichí, and they have *lanzamiento* ['hurling', 'throwing'; type of jumping-dancing in the service] in church as well.

According to Braunstein the many different churches and religious denominations among the Wichí are signs of identity rather than differences in dogma or doctrine. The authority of a preacher or a successful healer is both religious and political (2004: 37), as was Nazarito's for instance, who was both the leader of the community (apparently) and a pastor. The ways in

which the eastern Wichí are divided between different Churches correspond to their traditional social organization; this division has been mistakenly attributed to other causes, such as dogmatic differences. Diverse denominations accuse each other of shamanism and sorcery to differentiate between themselves and the others (Braunstein 2004: 37).

I never heard anybody talk badly about another Wichí Church, but I was at various occasions told other Wichí communities had shamans and sorcerers. Simón for example told me (interview 4) that, ‘In “42” there are no *brujos*, but there are some in “27” and Pantalla’ [other Wichí communities in the Las Lomitas area]. Braunstein adds that despite the accusations, neither different denominations nor shamans are seen as dogmatically opposed to each other, but as different social groups sharing the same sacred space. In their cosmic travels for example, Wichí shamans and Pentecostal pastors and healers meet each other (Braunstein 2004: 31). From what I heard the Wichí always condemned shamanism, even though I was also told that shamans can and do actually heal. Simón claimed (interview 4):

They [the sorcerers] can send sickness to a person. The *brujos* like to drink. They know how to heal as well, they heal with the help of wine, and the people are healthy afterwards. *Hiyawu’* [shaman] is the Wichí word for sorcerer. It was the religion from before, and the *brujos* today have been taught by their older relatives.

## **5. WICHÍ RELIGION, RITUAL AND HEALING**

This chapter is based on material gathered during my field study. The first part describes one particular Wichí service, the second section talks about the *cultos* in general and mentions particularly interesting events. Healing is an important element in both of these sections. Thereafter healing outside the *culto* is depicted, and the role of the healer is given some attention, and the last section gives the opinions of the Wichí about religion, rituals and healing.

### **5.1 A WICHÍ CULTO**

During my fieldwork I attended in total ten Wichí Pentecostal services. Nine of the *cultos* I participated in took place in the community ‘Lote 42’, eight of them in Simón Sarmiento’s church. One *culto* took place in the Wichí area ‘Lote 47’, about 4 kilometres away from ‘42’. In this section I describe one specific *culto*, the third one I attended, in the evening and night of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of

August 2003. All the *cultos* I participated in were similar and I have chosen this particular one because it was rather typical, and it was also one of the more 'lively' ceremonies where the dancing, singing etc was quite intense. Overall I believe it gives a good representative picture of the *cultos* I attended. Part of the reason why the Wichí *cultos* are so interesting, is that they are taking place in a time of rapid social and religious change. A telling detail is that most of the Wichí churches in the area were under construction while I was carrying out my field work. The *cultos* I was allowed to participate in and the picture I give is a snapshot of the year 2003 in a merging and negotiating process between shamanism and Christianity, the local and the global among the Wichí in the area of Las Lomitas.

### **THE SETTING**

We were sitting around the fire, talking and relaxing, when the sound of a drum started sounding through the night. Later on there was another drum, a guitar and the singing voices of children. After an hour or so, Ana Gómez, I and the others got up and started walking in the direction of the sound. The moon was not shining, and the night was pitch-black. We walked in a row on a narrow path, and I was trying to avoid the cacti and the thorny branches of the trees, which I knew were there on the side of the path, but could not see. I could not help to think that Simón, the pastor, had been widening the path to church to diminish the risk of encountering poisonous snakes. The people walking in front of me moved quickly, widening the gap between us. It was not more than a kilometre from Ana's house to church, but I was grateful when the neighbour's children, two girls of maybe six and eight, took me by the hand and led me to church. The small building was packed with people, and the music seemed quite loud. The contrast between the black night, and the light, people and music in the church was dramatic.

The church, which was situated on the edge of the Wichí community 'Lote 42', was built out of clay and sticks. It was of the same construction as the other Wichí houses, except for being about twice as big, some 4 metres wide and 8 metres long. It was Simón Sarmiento's church. He was building it himself, close to his own house. The church was under construction, and it still lacked a roof, so therefore, I was told, there were no services when it rained. However, no service was cancelled while I was there, because the rainy season had not yet started. When we arrived, at around 9:30 in the

evening, there were approximately 35-40 persons in church, including four musicians, two playing drums, and two playing guitars (Ana's son Raúl was one of the guitar players). Within half an hour another ten or so persons arrived. Ana and her family were usually one of the last people to appear.

There was a table with a white cloth on it, serving as an altar in the church. The altar was actually not used at every *culto*. Out of the ten *cultos* I attended, it was used seven times - the first five times, and after that in a *culto* when Wichí from a different area came to join the service in 'Lote 42', and once when we went to area 'Lote 47' to join their *culto*. It might have been a coincidence, but it makes me think that the altar is used on bigger or more 'formal' occasions, for instance when there are visitors from outside the congregation. On this particular *culto* there was also an empty chair in the mid section of the church by one of the long walls. On the very first *culto* I attended, there had been a small bench in that same spot, and some children and I had occasionally been sitting on it. It became the spot where I would usually stand during the *culto*, because it was where Ana would stand in the beginning, and I would stand next to her. It was also a good spot for observing as it was in the middle of the church. In other words, I assumed the chair was for me, but I never used it, and neither the chair nor the bench was brought out again on any following *cultos*. The Wichí know that white people usually sit on chairs, which the Wichí in general do not, and they probably put it out for me so I would feel welcome (I discuss later in section 5.3 why I think that was). There was no other furniture, nor decorations, in church. The only light was a naked flame torch close to the altar, which did not really light the entire space (it was not as bright as I had first thought when I walked in from the dark). Sometimes it was quite difficult to see what was going on in the insufficient light, but the flickering fire, together with the music, singing and dancing, greatly added to the elated and at times mesmerising atmosphere in church.

My estimate is that around half, or possibly more, of the people in 'Lote 42' attended this particular *culto* at Simón's church (on other occasions the congregation would vary above or below this figure). Simón himself thinks that almost all Wichí are Evangelicals, but not everybody attends the service. He says:

Sometimes people from "42" go to *cultos* in other areas as "47", Pantalla [both in the area of Las Lomitas], or they go to Llema or Tigre [towns a



couple of hours away by bus from Las Lomitas]. They go and they stay for several weeks, and visit [friends and family] at the same time.

Based on what I had heard from various persons, I also believe that some people from '42' only participate in *cultos* occasionally, or not at all, because of bad weather, poor health, or other personal reasons.

### **MAIN ELEMENTS OF A *CULTO***

According to Braunstein, there are four main parts of a *culto*: (1) testimonies (*testimonios*), (2) prayers (*oraciones*), (3) religious songs (*coritos*), and (4) healing (*curaciones*) ( Braunstein 2004: 34-35). In a testimony (1) a speaker directs a message to everybody in the church, it could be a sermon, a passage from the Bible, but also a more practical type of informal information about the local church events. The people who speak are, just like the musicians, usually people who move about the most in the community. A prayer (2) means that people ask for forgiveness, for healing, for God's protection, or they praise God. It is individual what one says, but also how one says it, if one talks or sings, if it is in Spanish or Wichí. This is the most chaotic moment of the ceremony. In the case of healing (4), the healer may ask the Lord for assistance, while rubbing the affected body parts of the disease-afflicted person, or perform a similar act. In some cases, the putting down of a white cloth on the ground in front of the sick person follows the rubbing. Another therapy consists of the pastor praying while putting his/her hand on the sick person's head, while the sick person kneels down in a central place in church. Both techniques are, according to Braunstein (2004: 34-35), carried out while the musicians play religious songs (3), although it should be mentioned that I witnessed healing during a *culto* in between songs as well.

The songs and the healing, which I will expand on soon, are important parts of the *culto*, so much is clear even to an outsider, who does not understand the language. It is more difficult to distinguish between testimony and prayer if one does not speak Wichí, and without Braunstein's description I do not think I would have seen them as two separate major parts of the service, but with that in mind, I can probably distinguish the two in a *culto*.

In this third *culto* I attended, a person would speak between the songs of the service, praising God from what I could understand from the few words in Spanish, but mainly talking about Jesus and the Holy Spirit, rather than God the Father (one of many examples of the Pentecostal and also Wichí

Christocentrism). This would have been the testimony. On this particular *culto* four persons spoke, which was quite common, even though sometimes more people would speak. Ana was one of the speakers, and the rest were men, including Simón and Félix. Not all the Wichí speak very good Spanish, but despite this, all the songs were in Spanish. When speaking, on the other hand, it was in Wichí, with certain key-*frases* or power words in Spanish, for example ‘*gracias Jesus*’ (‘thank you Jesus’), ‘*vamos a empezar la alabanza*’ (‘we are going to start the praising ’), or ‘*otra canción!*’ (‘another song!’). This is an example of a so-called code-switching between the new official discourse in Spanish, and the old, and familiar Wichí language. The two different ‘codes’ exist side by side in the *culto*.

Félix presented me in church that evening as ‘*hermana Gabi*’ (‘sister Gabi’), and I was asked to give a testimony for the first time. I was surprised to be asked, and did not know what to say, which I told Félix (I ended up not giving a testimony). Félix also asked me later that evening if I would read a passage from the Bible for the next service, to which I agreed. I was asked again in subsequent services to give testimony, which I did in Swedish, using certain power words in Spanish. A testimony is usually a more or less personal religious message to the other people in church. In my testimony, I most often expressed gratitude to be able to participate in the *culto* together with the Wichí.

The groups of musicians or ‘*songsters*’ (*cancionistas*), who are young men leading the performance of songs constitute a vital part of the praise in church, (Braunstein 2004: 36). At least three quarters, or even more, of the entire *culto* was dedicated to music and singing, and to a lesser extent also dancing. This was the case with all the *cultos* I attended. The music and the musicians are crucial to the *culto*. Once a planned *culto* did not take place because all the musicians (it was always the same musicians in the *cultos* in Simón’s church) were away on a trip, and did not return as they had intended. The *culto* just cannot be performed without the music.

Remigia Alonzo used to be a *pastora* (female pastor), in the Wichí community Pantalla, just east of Las Lomitas.), She told me (interview 12) she had been working as a *pastora* during a few years, but then a male pastor started working in the same area. They arranged it so he had his *cultos* on Sundays, and she hers on Mondays. However, she told me, because the musicians could not come to her *cultos* on Monday evenings (apparently

because they were working early on Tuesdays), she eventually had to stop having *cultos*, and now she does not work as a *pastora* any more. Without the support of the musicians the pastor, or *pastora*, cannot continue working.

One *culto* (the 4th one) was less lively than others, there were fewer people present, and they were not singing and dancing so much. Afterwards, on the way home, Ana's son Raúl told me that there had not been much *gozo* because the musicians had not played particularly well. The dancing is also important to the service. At least on one occasion Ana's other son, Félix, said 'tonight there is going to be a dance' ('esta noche hay baile') when he was referring to the service.

According to Braunstein (2004: 35), and it is something I agree with, the Wichí in general do not talk much, and when they talk, they do so in a quiet voice. They do not gesticulate or raise their voice, and do not interrupt somebody, who is talking. Self-control is seen as extremely important. In the religious ceremony of the *culto*, these characteristics are reversed, and music is a very important changing factor here (Braunstein 2004: 35). People are generally much louder and livelier in church than in every-day life, but for some the difference was particularly visible. Félix, who was normally a quiet and relatively shy person, was very active in church, he stood in front of the altar, talking loudly, waving his arms, and singing intensely. This 'anti-structure', or the obscuring of every day social roles that take place in the ritual, that Turner talks about (see 3.2) fits in well here. Anti-structure is an important part of Wichí rituals, because they dramatize the changes in the lives of the Wichí, by incorporating a new and non-ordinary behaviour in the ritual. Through the *gozo* (see 3.1) also created by this anti-structure behaviour, their bonds to each other are strengthened. This non-characteristic behaviour of the Wichí in the *culto* could also be partially explained by the Wichí social division between day and night. The day is mainly a time for work, while the night is to a larger extent for socializing (Fock 1982: 17). Therefore the Wichí also tend to be less reserved in the night time *culto*, and it also to some extent explains why there were no *cultos* during the day. The Wichí probably see the *culto* as much a social as a religious event. When I asked Simón (interview 8) why the *cultos* are always carried out at night, he said that it is just temporary, but when the roof of the church is finished, there will be services on Sunday mornings. It is nicer ('más lindo'), he says, during the day. Sometimes Simón

planned *cultos* for the morning despite the unfinished roof, but these did not happen.

Braunstein says that when people are dancing and singing the most, women end up in religious ecstasy and men sometimes cry. The pastor directs the people to a state of *gozo* through the control of the religious songs. When the ceremony is culminating, he asks for many *coritos* together, and when he judges there has been enough *gozo*, he asks them to reduce the music (2004: 35). I did see several women in ecstasy during the *culto*, but I never saw anybody cry. I suppose it could be the case that the pastor was directing the atmosphere in church through the musicians, yet it was not very obvious, and I did not notice.

### **WOMEN AND MEN, ADULTS AND CHILDREN**

Except for Ana, to whom I will return later, it was mainly the approximately ten children and youths, who stood in the middle of the church and were the most active. From the very beginning of a *culto* (when many were still a bit reserved) the children would sing enthusiastically, stomping the rhythm with their feet, clapping their hands, or dancing. The group of children and youths twice went up to the altar and kneeled in front of it. From what I could see, the children were mainly girls, but as it was quite dark, one or two of them could have possibly been young boys. The four musicians, who were all men, stood in the front of the church, behind the altar. They were quite animated, playing their instruments and singing loudly. All the men, including the pastor, stood at the front of the church, by the side of the altar. Most of them stood clapping their hands, and singing, but not as actively as the musicians. The women stood on the other side of the church by the entrance, furthest away from the altar. The majority of them were less active than the men, many of the women stood and watched, clapping their hands a little, some of them singing. Generally there were more women than men in church, maybe 30-35 women, and 15-20 men. These figures include the gender of the children or youths under the age of 15-16, who in turn constituted roughly half of those present in church. I have not included the young children (approximately 3- 8 years old), boys mainly, who mostly stayed outside church playing.

This female/male behaviour and division of church space was the same in all the *cultos*. One of the services in '42', number five, took place in Nazarito's church (he was the other pastor in '42'), or more precisely, outside

it, as it was under construction. People stood as they do in church, but in a more circular formation, because they were not limited by a square church. The men stood by the altar, which had been placed outside the entrance of the half built church, and the women were on the other side of the circle, while the children and youths stood as always in the middle.

Félix told me (interview 3) that usually a married couple work as ‘pastores’ (‘pastors’), man and wife working together. If, for instance, the man cannot make a *culto*, or if he is sick, his wife can arrange the service. If the pastor dies, she can take over his work. Félix points out that this was exactly what happened in the case of Remigia Alonzo, who took over the role of pastor (or *pastora* to be more precise) after her husband when he died (already mentioned in section ‘Main elements of a *culto*’ of chapter 5.1).

There is a general division of official male roles, and unofficial and spiritual female roles among many Pentecostals (see section 4.1). This is often seen as a reflection of the position of women in society, where they may have the power to influence, but often do not have the official role or title. It is interesting that this division seems to be reproduced even in the egalitarian society of the Wichí where women have a high status. Although it is quite likely that the Wichí do not perceive it that way, that the division between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ is a Western notion, or at least the notion of a more hierarchical society. Even though Ana did not have an ‘official role’, in for example the eyes of the Mestizos or Western missionaries, as the pastor or musicians did, she was at first sight the focal point of the *culto*. I am not sure if there would be a *culto* without her, it is possible (although it never happened during my field work), but without her healing and religious ecstasy, it would be a *culto* with little *gozo*, probably one not worth having. The pastor is more or less dependent on Ana, although she is also dependent on the musicians for her healing in the *culto*, unlike in the case of the healing outside the *culto*. Without the musicians there is definitely no service. The opinions on whether there could be a *culto* without a pastor were divided, pastor Simón claiming that it is not possible, while Félix said that the pastor’s wife could take over if it is for some reason necessary. Either way, Ana’s role was probably more significant than the role of the pastor. I believe that most Wichí think that a healer, a pastor, musicians, and many people participating are all important for a successful *culto*.

## HEALING AND RELIGIOUS ECSTASY

The healing is the most dramatic of the four main elements of the *culto*, and possibly the most important one. In the beginning of the third *culto*, Ana stood in the mid-section of the church, by a wall, roughly between the women and men, with the women on her right side and the men on her left. She was singing the songs the musicians played, clapping her hands, stomping her feet, being more active than the other women. After roughly three songs, in one of the short breaks between songs, she started chanting loudly (without words), and sometimes she changed into talking or ‘half-singing’. From what I understood from one of her few phrases in Spanish, she was praising Jesus, and asking him to heal the sick. This is the prayer that was also one of the main four parts of the *culto*. It only took place during a period of a few minutes. After that, Ana and Félix approached the altar, where an old man stood, and they put their hands on his head, and prayed for several minutes. The old man stayed by the altar during almost the whole service, jumping up and down during the music.

Some children and youths (mainly girls again), but also Ana, another older woman, and an older man, altogether maybe 13-15 persons were wearing special clothes, so-called *tiras* (‘shreds’ or ‘strips’) over their normal clothes. They put them on after roughly half way through the *culto*. The *tiras* was a kind of white tunic or long shirt that went down to their knees, where the fabric was cut in strips below the waist. Most of the *tiras* were decorated with red painted-on crosses. When I later asked about these garments, I was told they wear them in church because Jesus used to wear white clothes, similar to the *tiras*. To the question why only some people wore them, I got the answer that not everybody owns white clothes, and that they cannot afford to buy them.

After the prayer in the *culto*, healing would usually take place. After the prayer in the third *culto*, Ana was clapping her hands more intensely, dancing more vigorously, and eventually started jumping up and down, ending up in the very middle of the church, right in front of the altar. The children and youths that were mostly active stood in a semi-circle behind her, dancing and singing more intensely than before. Then Ana stopped for a short while, and approached Félix with a white cloth the size of a handkerchief. She brushed or stroked her hands over Félix’ arms, shoulders, back and especially his stomach, then put the handkerchief against his stomach, and seemed to pull

something out of it. She wrapped up whatever she had removed from his body into the cloth, and walked out of church with it. She came back a few minutes later, and spread out the empty cloth on the ground in the church.

The day after the *culto* (interview 1), Félix told me about the healing:

Ana took the illness out of my body with the cloth, carried it out of church, put it on the ground, and the sickness flies away, and cannot enter a human being again. Sometimes you can see the disease taken out of the body, but the healer does not always show it, because all healers might not have been able to remove the pain. A healer usually uses a cloth, a bag, or paper as an aid to remove the illness, but an experienced healer can take out the pain with just her or his bare hands, especially if there is a Bible on the table.

To the question where disease comes from, he answered that it belongs to Satan.

There are clear similarities between the healing in the *culto* today, and traditional shamanic healing (see 4.5), as the removal of a pathogen with the help of a white cloth above shows.

After Ana had healed Félix and spread out the handkerchief on the ground in the church, she went back to dancing, she danced and jumped up and down, and back and forth for perhaps twenty minutes. First she did this on her own, and later with another woman. Ana and the young woman held each others hands, standing side by side, rocking back and forth, particularly with their upper bodies, breathing deeply and rhythmically (hyperventilating). Félix stood next to them the whole time, praying. He held Ana when, after some time, her body became stiff and twisted as if in cramps. She held out her arms towards the sky, rocked back and forth, swayed, gave a shout and fell to the ground. A short while after her, the other woman did almost the same thing as Ana, but not as intensely. Contrary to Ana, after she had fallen to the ground, she kept emitting noises as if she were about to vomit. Félix and two other men, stood next to them, supporting them and thanking God. The men put their hands on the women's heads, or backs if the women were kneeling down. When Ana and the other woman stood up again, they seemed to have calmed down. The other woman went and stood by the wall, where she had been previously, while Ana remained in the middle of the church, and they both slowly resumed dancing and jumping again, but not as intensively as

before. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit manifested in the ecstasy of Ana and the other woman is very similar to the possession by the spirit *Welán* that traditionally initiated shamans (see 4.5).

Except for the two grown women, there were also a few young girls and children (from what I could see the same children that had been active during the whole *culto*), who were also jumping back and forth while breathing heavily. At least two young girls, approximately 13-15 years old, were 'running' back and forth a few steps while holding hands and hyperventilating. They did this until they started shaking and then fell to the ground.

They laid there for at least 5-10 minutes without moving, before they unsteadily stood up again with the help of Félix, and went to stand by the wall where they stood before. Félix later told me that those two girls do not usually attend church. At the second service I participated in, there was also an older woman who was very active, dancing and hyperventilating, but in general, it was young girls and children (except for Ana) who were involved. I never witnessed a middle aged woman or a man of any age hyperventilate. Félix was one of the few men who danced, and when a man did dance, it was never as intense as when a woman danced.

According to Braunstein, when the Wichí go into religious ecstasy they hyperventilate and in the end lose balance because of the spinning involved in the dance (2004: 36). I never saw any spinning during the dancing, but I do agree that the hyperventilating seemed to be an important aid to reach ecstasy. Braunstein claims that the ceremony of the *culto* reaches an overpowering peak during the healing rites, singing and ecstatic dancing, and it leads the partakers to the state of *gozo* (2004: 36). This was also my impression of the service, and more specifically I perceived it as being intensified up to the moment of Ana's religious ecstasy, and after which *gozo* declined.

I talked to Simón (interview 10) about the fact that more women seem to reach ecstasy during the *culto*, and I asked him why he thought that was the case. He said, 'more women have *gozo*. It is because their husbands do not want to go to the *culto*, and the women have to pray for them as well. The men sing, so they cannot dance or jump, because then they would stop singing'. Abel (interview 11) also agrees with me that women seem to have more *gozo* than men. He said he did not know why that was, but he added that some of



them might not feel the spirit of God, but the *gozo* of this world. ‘One has to know why one is dancing’.

### **‘SPONTANEOUS FORMALITY’**

The *culto* in ‘Lote 42’ did not have an ‘official’ start time, it started with a few musicians gathering in church, and when people heard them play they would gradually work their way to the church and such was also the case with the one service I attended in the area ‘Lote 47’. All the services I attended took place at night, the musicians usually started playing around 8 or 9 o’clock in the evening, maybe a little later, and by 9:30- 10 o’clock most people that were going to attend the service had appeared. At the first *culto* I arrived very early, just after 8 o’clock, and there were only two musicians in church then, playing and singing, and three small children clapping their hands and singing as well. Successively more children and another two musicians arrived, with the rest of the community arriving later.

The length of the service depended on several things, for instance how many persons were present, how good the atmosphere was, what the weather was like etc, but normally it would be over by midnight or not long thereafter. Unlike the gradual beginning, when the service was over and the musicians had stopped playing, everybody would usually leave church at the same time. Ana and her family would leave quickly, but a few persons would stand outside church talking after the *culto*. Afterwards we would go home, sit around the fire for a little while, and then go to bed quite soon after.

The service would not be scheduled for a particular day of the week, it seemed to depend on the weather, the musicians, the pastor, and not least on Ana. Several times a planned *culto* did not take place, plans changed in the last minute, and sometimes an unplanned *culto* was arranged at short notice. It seemed though that it was more common that the service took place during the weekend, even if to my knowlegde no Wichí in the area held a regular weekday job. Out of the ten *cultos* I participated in, one took place on a Thursday, one on a Friday, five on a Saturday, and three on a Sunday. It happened that there was no *culto* at all one week, and at other times there could be services two days in a row, so the *cultos* seemed to appear in a quite improvised and spontaneous manner. I do not know if most people that went to the services knew beforehand that it was going to take place, or if they did

not know until they heard music from the church. I talk to the pastor frequently, which meant I usually knew when he had planned a *culto*.

The overall impression of the Wichí service seemed to be one of happiness and informality. Adding to the informal atmosphere were all the children, mostly boys, running in and out of church during the service. Children in general either participated very actively in the *culto* (mainly girls), or hardly at all (mainly boys). The boys were, as has been mentioned already, largely outside church, playing. Usually nobody seemed to be bothered, or even notice the children, even though sometimes one could hardly hear the pastor, or the person speaking at the time, when the children were running through and around the church, shouting and laughing. Just once did I witness that a few children, that were making a lot of noise in church, were reproached by Félix.

At times the atmosphere in church was almost chaotic. Nobody really seemed to be directing the events, there was an overall impression that everything was happening quite spontaneously. However, after a few *cultos*, I noticed that the services were all very similar, pretty much the same thing happened in the same order, but with varying intensity, so they were probably more ‘organized’ than one would realise at first. Most people seemed at least to have the same idea about how a *culto* should be carried out, and the ‘spontaneous feelings’ were more or less expected. As Rappaport said (see section 3.1) formality in ritual does not have to be stiff and high-brow, it could be the ‘spontaneous formality’ of the Wichí *culto*. The *culto* still leaves more space for personal expression compared for example to a Catholic mass.

One of the reasons for a prevailing spontaneous atmosphere in the *culto*, was because the official main figure in church, the pastor, was not authoritative, or even very high-profile. He did not speak more than the other three persons that spoke in the *culto* that evening, he did not wear any particular clothes (I was later told he could not afford *tiras*) and he did not seem to be telling anybody what to do. The first two *cultos* I attended I actually did not know who the pastor was; it took me a few times to figure it out. I did not notice that the pastor was directing anything, but according to Braunstein (see 5.1, section ‘Main elements of a *culto*’), the pastor controls the musicians, and therefore also the atmosphere in church. The person that clearly was in focus in every way was Ana. Even she though kept quite anonymous at the first *culto* I went to, at least during the time I was there.

Everybody in church was quite reserved the first time I attended a *culto*, but they gradually accepted, or at least got used to my presence, and the services grew livelier. The Wichí society is not authoritarian, and neither is the Pentecostal movement (particularly the Scandinavian version of it), so it is not surprising that the pastor did not have a prominent leader role in church and the overall feeling was very personal and spontaneous.

## **5.2 CULTOS**

A so-called *ofrenda* ('offering'), took place altogether three times during the ten services (the 6th, 7th and 9th time), but not during the third *culto* described above. The *ofrenda* usually meant that a drum was passed around in church, and some people put money on it. It never added up to more than a few pesos, and I would usually have given half of it. *Santa Cena* ('holy communion') was not given out during the third *culto* described above either, and out of the ten services I went to, Holy Communion was taken only three times (the second, fifth, and ninth time). When it was given it was in the second half of the *culto*, after Ana had been healing. Everybody was then given a piece of bread and a drink of wine from a cup that was carried around in church. When I asked Félix about it, I was told the communion did not happen more often because the parishioners could not afford the wine every time. Paradoxically, the sixth *culto* I attended, there was no holy communion either, even though I had given Félix wine the same afternoon for the purpose of the *Santa Cena*.

At every *culto* Ana would pray with varying intensity, kneel before the altar, chant, praise Jesus, heal, hyperventilate and often peak to religious ecstasy (see 5.1, section 'Healing and religious ecstasy'). It was only a few other persons in church, who would praise Jesus out loud as well, and kneel before the altar, though some children also did the latter. It was also mainly groups of children who would 'sway' with their upper bodies while standing still, or run back and forth and hyperventilate in groups. Young girls would also sway in couples, sometimes they would dance or jump up and down until they fell to the ground. On the fourth *culto* I noticed that after Ana and some of the girls had been dancing/jumping up and down for a while, they did motions as if they were wiping something off their legs starting up on the thighs, and wiping towards their feet. Félix told me the day after (interview 7) that they did that so as they would not be in pain. According to him, the dancing can cause pain, and this can be wiped away.

At many *cultos*, but not in the third one described, Ana would walk around the whole church a few times, putting her hand or both hands on people's shoulders, or heads, saying something in Wichí at the same time. Sometimes she would also wipe their heads (wiping the pain away), and at times Félix, or the pastor, Simón, would help her. Another time, it was the 8<sup>th</sup> *culto* I attended, people from the Wichí-community 'Lote 47', had come to join the *culto*. Ana and Félix were going to heal the pastor from '47', Gonzalo, and several other older women were helping as well to begin with. They had all put their hands on him, mainly on his head and shoulders, and they prayed. Later Ana removed the sickness out of him with a white cloth. As Braunstein says, the healing rites are an expression of the adaptation of Wichí shamanism to Pentecostal Christianity. Pentecostal healing is a collective process. In the Wichí *culto*, individual patients are healed, and the 'healing spirit' (who is seen as somebody with exceptional ability for curing) plays the main role, but everybody present helps in varying extent to perform the ceremony. The Pentecostal healing has led to an erosion of the former shamanic exclusivity, where earlier only one or few persons would heal without much help from others. Pentecostal rites can be described as collective forms of shamanism set in Christian framework (Braunstein 2004: 36). The healing in the 8<sup>th</sup> *culto* is a good example of shamanic pain relief by laying-on of hands, but set in a Pentecostal church and carried out as collective healing, even though it is performed under the leadership of the healer Ana.

This next example of the removing of a pathogen that I witnessed during a service was more dramatic than usual. Ana's grandchild Teli often suffered from bad headaches (as a result from meningitis a few years earlier), and the pain was very bad that particular day. During the 7<sup>th</sup> *culto*, after chanting and prayer, Ana and Teli stood in the middle of the church, and Ana started jumping towards and away from Teli, shaking her fist at her. This went on for a few minutes. Then suddenly Ana 'jumped' at her, gave out a loud shout and snatched at the same time something out from Teli's head with her bare hand. Ana blew in the clenched fist where she kept what she had taken out of Teli's head, and then she threw the illness out of church, through the slats in the half built church roof.

I quite often witnessed healing through laying-on of hands and removing of a pathogen, but I was also lucky enough to observe the returning of a lost soul. At the 8<sup>th</sup> *culto*, when Wichí from 'Lote 47' were visiting, Ana healed a small

child. The child appeared to be one year old, and her/his soul, I was told, had been taken away. After the singing, chanting and prayer, the mother who held her child stood in the middle of the church together with Ana. Ana first gave out a shout at the child, which made it cry, of course, then she wiped its head using her hands, possibly using saliva, I did not see clearly. After that she took a few steps away from the child, raised her arms towards the sky (the church roof was still not finished), stood there for a few minutes, and then, all of a sudden, she seemed to catch something in her hands. She put what she had caught, the lost soul I assume, on the child's head, underneath the hood s/he was wearing, and blew on its head. Ana then held the child in her arms for a few moments before returning it to its mother.

The day after the 8<sup>th</sup> *culto* I was talking to Simón (interview 10) and I asked him what had happened to the child in the *culto* the day before. Simón replied that the child had lost its soul. He said:

You cannot lose your soul. If nobody heals you, you will become very sick and die. The doctor does not see the disease. Anybody could have taken its soul, an *'ahààt*, for example the child's dead father. The *'ahààt* are with us, but you do not see them. There are more *'ahààt* further north. Jesus always has enemies, *'ahààt* and living people. When you have lost your soul, you feel tired, you do not want to walk or eat. After your soul has been returned to you, you feel better, after a couple of days or so. Something had scared the child that was healed yesterday, and therefore it had lost its soul. It could have been thunder for example, or the wind that could have carried the soul away.

This is another good example of merging between traditional beliefs and Pentecostalism. The healer was in a Pentecostal church using a shamanic technique to search for the lost soul, catch it, and reunite the body and soul of the patient through blowing on the head. Jesus was mentioned by the pastor while talking about soul-loss, but so were the spirits *'aháát*, and also thunder or wind as possibly responsible for the soul-loss.

All the Wichí present in church always participated more or less actively in the *culto*, and it would have been difficult to remain a mere observer. My own participation in the *culto* increased with time, as a result of expectations and direct requests from the Wichí. I myself am not Pentecostal, although I am very interested in different religious expressions and beliefs, and I would - to

some extent - say that I am religious. The role I felt I was given in the *culto* was quite surprising for me, especially at first. It was common in the successive *cultos* that I was asked by Ana, Simón or Félix in the beginning of the service to walk up to the altar, kneel and pray (I usually did this in Swedish), while sometimes Félix or Simón prayed with me. I was also asked to give testimony a few times, and Simón asked me to read from the Bible a couple of times in church, which I did. Ana would often, in almost every *culto*, heal me, although sometimes I was not certain if she was healing, or just blessing. As I knelt down in front of the altar she put her hands on my head, back, and my stomach and she blew underneath my shirt, by my heart. At times she told me to kneel in the spot where I was standing in church, and she healed me in the same manner.

During the *cultos* I would usually stand by the side wall in the mid section of the church, clapping my hands, or dancing, or both. After I had already attended quite a few *cultos*, Ana led me a couple of times to the middle of the church, where we both danced/jumped. The second time this happened was in the last *culto* that I attended, which took place in pastor Gonzalo's church in the area 'Lote 47' (his church had a roof, but no ceilings). Ana had been healing me in the *culto* in '47' with the laying-on of hands, praying and blowing in the area of my heart like before. The only thing she said in Spanish was 'más fuerza' ('more strength'). After that she led me to the middle of the church, where we danced with a few other women. Subsequently Ana healed a man from '47' and Félix, Simón, Gonzalo and I were helping with putting our hands on the sick man's body and praying.

Abel Sarmiento, Simón's older brother, is the only person that I talked with who told me he did not go to the *culto* (interview 9). He said:

I do not like to go to the *culto*, I am happy reading the Bible on my own. This here is not a *culto*, what Simón does, there should be preaching, testimony, and the first minister has to read from the Bible. A person who knows God is needed. The people here do not repent and they do not confess, so therefore they do not have liberty.

Abel also told me that he believes that God sent me to help and that I should preach to the Wichí at a later stage, after I had learned more (when talking to people in the field I always stressed that I was there to learn more about religion). He said he was uncertain if Simón really knew enough about God

and religion. He added that it is not enough to just know God, but one should imitate Jesus, live like him. One must have a good teacher, or read the Bible.

When the Mataco became Pentecostals, they also entered into an alliance with a powerful group, not unlike the relationship between the Mataco and the Keepers of nature (see 4.5). The missionaries were seen as influential and good to 'sign a contract with'. As the Wichí have an inclusive cosmos it was not very difficult for them to view the missionaries that way. I always stressed that I was a student of anthropology while speaking to the Wichí. Nevertheless, I am white and I asked extensively about religion and attended *cultos*, and therefore I was most likely seen as a kind of missionary by the Wichí. Consequently I was given that type of role. I believe I was viewed as somebody that could possibly have money and influence, or at least influential contacts. It did not cost them much to give me a role in church, and make me feel welcome in that context, although I was not all that welcome in other areas. I believe they did not want to reveal too much of their culture to a stranger. Another possible reason is also that the countryside, the area outside the Wichí community, and also the community of the Mestizos and whites, was the area of another Keeper, which may have caused conflict if I had been there as well. Sometimes I walked into town with other Wichí women, but I was never allowed to go foraging with them into the country side. In a way I could also have been seen as a liminal person. I was a foreigner, outside of my normal region of white people, but participating in the Wichí *culto*. I was a representative of the foreign, of the global. This probably made me a liminal person in the eyes of the Wichí, and liminal phenomena can be dangerous, but also powerful if safely incorporated into a familiar ritual. My presence in the Wichí *culto* could also be used as 'proof' by the Wichí to the Mestizos that their *culto* is not just an Amerindian ritual, as there are also white 'missionaries' present. All the reasons mentioned are probable reasons why I was given such a role in the *culto*, and I was even asked to become Ana's assistant in healing (I will get to this in the next section 5.3). Overall, I believe my role in the *culto* was not just my own personal experience, but to some extent it also shows the way many of the Wichí view and interact with white people, in particular white people they perceive as religious officials.

### 5.3 HEALING OUTSIDE THE *CULTO*

An important feature of the Pentecostal Churches of the Wichí is, according to Braunstein (2004: 33, 39), the importance they ascribe to persons seen as having the gift of the 'healing spirit'. Félix says (interview 2) that Ana often prays through songs or chants in the evenings outside her house, something I have seen and heard, and this happens because somebody is sick, either somebody in her family, or somebody else has brought a sick person with them. Félix told me that if one is sick and medications do not help, one should pray. He also said that even white people came to Ana to be healed, especially when her family lived closer to town. Ana did not usually go anywhere to heal, people came to her. Félix said that the reason she heals only in the evenings is simply a practical one, it is the time when most people are home.

An important part of Ana's role as a healer is also dream interpretation. Ana stated (interview 5) that there used to be more people who understood dreams, but the youth today do not understand them because they do not have anybody who can teach them. Ana told me how she became a healer and a seer:

When I was younger I was depressed and I used to drink. I prayed to God that I would understand dreams. When Félix was about 18 years old, the Spirit entered my heart, and my heart ached for three days. I thought that I was sick. I talked to the older people in church and they told me that it was not anything dangerous, that it meant that I was going to heal and understand dreams. And I was happy about it.

She added that once you have started healing you cannot stop, as stopping would make you sick.

There are great similarities between shamanic initiation and Ana's transformation into a healer, and as Braunstein claims, many Pentecostal healers are former shamans (2004: 39). As a classic Wichí shaman, Ana was sick before she became a healer, and then, according to her, the Spirit entered her heart, compared to the spirit *Welán*, which would enter a shaman to initiate him. Both spirits cause physical pain, and they both transmit power to the future healer. Ana's experience, it seems, has partially been interpreted by her from a Christian point of view. Ana prayed to God for the gift of understanding dreams, and she went to church to talk to people when she did not know what was happening. When she is healing, Ana prays for the sick



with pleas to Jesus, but the singing and chanting she uses to do it is the same technique shamans used to communicate with spirits. Ana would say, as many Wichí sometimes also say, that before the Pentecostal missionaries there were only *brujos* among the Wichí. However, it did not seem as though everything was all bad in the ‘old days’, as she stresses that it was older people she turned to when the ‘Spirit had entered her heart’, and not to a Pentecostal missionary. She also believes that older Wichí (probably non-Christians) were better at understanding dreams, something which the new Christian people do not seem to do.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of August (interview 5) Ana told me she had had a dream that she needed to find an assistant, a woman or a man. Four days later Ana dreamt that she, Raúl and I were healing somebody with a headache. In Ana’s dream I laid my hands on that persons head, and I took out a small object from her/his head, but then I got scared and threw it on the ground (Ana was laughing when she was telling me this part). After her first dream I told her that I would be her assistant if she wanted, and after her second dream she asked me. For different reasons it never really happened, ironically mostly because of my bad health, although I did help with the laying-on of hands for healing on a few occasions.

I had problems with influenza and headaches in Las Lomitas. I talked to Félix about it (5<sup>th</sup> of August) and he said that Ana would heal me (‘she was going to split my head with an axe’ - one of his first jokes). That same evening, about 9 o’clock, Ana and Raúl were healing a girl outside Ana’s house. After they had finished healing her, Raúl asked me to come over. I was told to sit down on the chair where the girl had just been sitting. Both Ana and Raúl were feeling my head, mostly around my temples, forehead and on top of my head, after I had told them where it was hurting. Raúl said that my head was warm, which is bad, warmth means sickness to the Wichí. Both prayed to God (I assume, it was in Wichí) while they were holding a hand each on my head. Raúl was standing in front of me, Ana next to me. After that, Ana put her hand on my arms and shoulders and on my chest and then ‘wiped’ or stroked with her hands on my temples and my forehead. She wiped my forehead with a piece of cloth and blew on my head. With that the healing was finished, and Raúl told me to buy a particular oil at the pharmacy named ‘Prem’, also-called ‘aceite verde’ (‘green oil’), which he told me was very good for healing, for rubbing in the spot where it hurts. He said Jesus himself

had used it. I never found it in the pharmacy. Here is an example of a slide from Biblical time and space to present time and local space- according to Raúl the oil Jesus used is still employed today in Las Lomitas. There is also an incorporation of both Christianity (prayers to Jesus), Western medicine (the pharmacy and the oil there), and a Western item (the chair) in the healing that otherwise has strong shamanic elements, as laying-on of hands, wiping pain away, using a cloth, and blowing as healing.

Braunstein claims that illness is generally seen by the Wichí as a result of the victim not having enough faith in the Christian God, but it could also be explained, according to shamanic beliefs, as the result of sorcery by a shaman (2004: 36). When I was sick, I was often told by Ana, Félix or Raúl that I was sick because somebody had spoken badly of me. They would tell me to pray to get strength and to counteract the bad talk. They said they prayed for me as well. I was never told directly I did not have enough faith, but as I was often told to pray, I suppose it was implied.

I was also healed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, as was described in the very first passage of the introduction in this thesis, when Ana removed a piece of plastic from my throat. That was the only time I saw healing carried out during the day. As earlier healing outside of the *culto*, it was even more clearly shamanic than the healing carried out in the *culto*. I cannot find any Christian elements in this healing at all. I could usually make out the words ‘Jesús’, or ‘Dios’ (‘God’ in Spanish) in the Wichí prayer, but I did not hear them at all that particular time. The healing had involved different shamanic healing techniques, such as chanting, laying-on of hands, wiping away pain, blowing, the use of saliva and the actual extraction of the pathogen. The bit of plastic was the only ‘modern’ or ‘Western’ element in the healing, except for me and the actual house.

#### **5.4 WICHÍ OPINIONS ABOUT RELIGION AND HEALING**

Simón told me (interview 10) that he ‘entered religion in 1982’, and started as a pastor in 1995. His uncle on his mother’s side was a minister in ‘42’ and before he died he called Simón to ask him to become a minister as well. Simón explained that if you want to become a pastor you do not have to go to a school, but you have to talk to everybody in the area where you live to see if they accept you as their minister. And an official permit is also necessary, he

adds. Simón does not have a co-pastor, so when he is sick, for example, there is no service. He says:

It is very hard to work as a minister. When somebody becomes active as a minister, they are afraid to die because people talk badly before entering into church, and God himself takes the minister's soul away from him. Remigia Alonzo [the former *pastora* in "Pantalla"] had severe stomach problems when she started as a minister and I was sick for a year when I became a pastor. I was so weak I could hardly walk, and in the end I just collapsed [he was later diagnosed to have tuberculosis].

In a similar way to Ana, Simón sees being a pastor and a healer as a calling. To Simón it was a power passed from a dying relative, and not something you could be trained for in a school or hospital. Wichí shamans often 'inherited' their roles from a dying family member as well. There is also the risk, as both a healer (as Ana also mentioned) and as a pastor of becoming sick oneself, as a result of somebody talking badly about one.

Simón says (interview 4) that in '42' it is Nazarito (the other minister in '42'), Ana and himself that can heal. They learned from older people. They were told that they had to search and pray and that God would answer. He added that there are people who know how to heal better than others because they work hard and pray a lot. Simón himself started healing in 1988, before he became a minister. All the ministers know how to heal, he said. There are different diseases and sometimes a handkerchief or a cloth has to be used. It is safer like that. Abel stated (interview 11) that people who in the past used to heal, were people who got their power from demons. Félix said a very similar thing a few days earlier (interview 2). He said that sickness is caused by *brujos* talking badly about somebody and that makes the person sick. According to him *brujos* get their power from 'others', other than God, and often their relatives are *brujos* as well. To my question a few days later (interview 7), who Thokwjwaj was (the trickster who had initiated the first Wichí shaman), Félix answered that he was Satan. He adds, 'we are new people now' ('somos gente nueva ahora').

The Wichí generally want to present themselves as Christians and new people today, and they talk about classic shamans as sorcerers, and the trickster Thokwjwaj as Satan. Although Simón also claimed that the people who can heal today learned from older people, in a manner similar to Ana's

claim that people today do not know how to interpret dreams as well as older people did (see 5.3, interview 5). Simón also stated that those who have the gift of healing, have it because they work hard and pray, and on another occasion (interview 4) he mentioned that *brujos* can actually heal as well as harm, so indirectly he is saying that even *brujos* have to work hard, which he meant as a positive thing. Sometimes it appears that the Wichí have different ways of talking about the past, that there is a double discourse. On the one hand, there is an 'official' discourse, possibly taken from the missionaries, that states that everything old, and pre-Christian, was bad. On the other hand, there is another type of discourse, where the 'old days' were good as well, although it is often not said explicitly (at least not while speaking to me).

I asked Abel what it means to be Christian. He told me, 'A Christian should not criticize anybody, but must love everybody, even if they are not Christians. Satan is fighting, alcohol and bad jokes'. He also said that it is important to forgive. 'The first shall be the last' ('el primero será el último'), he said as a comment about the Wichí in society. This is an enormously empowering thought, most likely linked to the Wichí conversion to Pentecostalism and the feeling of new hope, power and acceptance they acquired through that.

While talking quite generally about God and Jesus, Félix said (interview 3):

Jesus created all human beings, languages do not matter, all humans are the same. God is higher in the sky, higher than Jesus, who is closer to humans. Jesus and God are not together in the same place. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one. The Holy Spirit can transform itself into a dove. It is Jesus himself that blesses people when they feel *gozo*.

To the question when Jesus was here on earth, Félix said that Jesus worked in Argentina, about three generations ago. Abel who is present as well, disagreed, saying that Jesus was active in Egypt a long time ago. Félix added that it was the pharmacists and the hospital staff that killed Jesus, because he was healing people and took their jobs away from them.

This is another example of a slide from Biblical time and space to present time and local space. There is also a strong Christocentrism (it was Jesus, and not God - the Father, who created humans), and a Wichí interpretation of Jesus and God as not being one and the same, which most Christians would

not agree with. God and Jesus as separate corresponds more to the traditional Wichí belief of a good, but distant, Creator that does not intervene much in the life of humans, as opposed to the different spirits that can both interfere in ones life and can be persuaded more easily.

According to Rappaport (see 3.3), self-referential and canonical messages in religions support and supplement each other, and would not work on their own. This is true in all religions, but particularly among religions like Pentecostalism, where the Biblical and the personal are seen as very close. The Wichí also tend to have a very holistic view of the cosmos, where the canonical (the words in the Bible) seem very applicable to one's personal situation. To give another example, Félix told me on one occasion that he believed judgment day would come quite soon, 'we will probably not experience it, but our children will', he said. He saw the words of the Bible not as purely theoretical or symbolical, but as something directly relevant to his life in a very personal way. It should, however, be emphasized that a person's perception of the words of the Bible varied between different Wichí, as Abel's and Félix's comments above show. Gathering and hunting societies have been described as individualistic, including having individual beliefs. The different Wichí interpretations of the Bible could be seen as a continuity of this individualism, even after the conversion to Pentecostalism.

I was talking with Félix (interview 1) about healing in church when he told me:

There are different Holy Spirits. There are good spirits, many spirits, for example, spirit of dancing, spirit of the tongue, spirit of the spirit, spirit of healing, spirit of science (when somebody is good at understanding the bible), the spirit of singing, etc. You can receive these spirits in any place.

Abel said also (interview 11) that there are many spirits; spirits of faith, of preaching, of singing, of tongues, of healing and others. The Pentecostals, and other Charismatics, usually speak of different 'talents', for instance of singing, as 'Gifts of the Spirit'. They would see the description of them in terms of 'Holy Spirits' as borderline sacrilegious, as they believe there is only one Holy Spirit. Also, Charismatics do not include dancing as a gift of the Spirit, as Félix did (but not Abel). The dancing is an important part of the *culto*, and

according to Wichí traditional beliefs, dancing scares off evil spirits, so most likely therefore Félix did see it as one of the ‘Gifts’.

## **6. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN WICHÍ RELIGION AND RITUAL**

In this chapter I analyze the results of my field study. I particularly stress the paradox of change as a way to continuity, and how the Wichí converted to Pentecostalism on their own cultural terms. I also focus on the importance of ritual to strengthen the community and on the significance of ritual as communication.

My first question in this thesis was: How has Pentecostalism, initially foreign to the Wichí, been articulated in local terms? As Anderson says (see 4.3), in order to be successful, all new religions must have the advantages of the old beliefs. I believe, in line with Rappaport’s reasoning, that no religions are completely ‘new’, but based on former religions. In the same way, converted people cannot just shed their old beliefs. Beliefs tend to have a doxic character and it is very difficult to free oneself from them completely. This also applies to the Wichí. The conversion has not led to an abrupt break with the past; instead a merging of their old beliefs and Pentecostalism has taken place, where elements of Christianity were reinterpreted to fit into the cosmology of the Wichí. This merging was made possible relatively easily because Pentecostalism is a flexible faith, which stresses peoples own interpretation of the Bible, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Wichí have interpreted Pentecostalism from their cultural point of view, as all cultures to a certain extent interpret incoming creeds, although it is especially clear in the case of the Wichí. The merging was also made possible by the inclusive cosmos of the Wichí, and by a general compatibility between the two religions.

At first sight, it might look as if the conversion to Pentecostalism is a dramatic change for the Wichí, because of exterior symbols such as churches and Bibles. This first impression could also depend on our Western perception, as we get certain associations by the phenomenon ‘Pentecostal Church’, and see what we expect to see, interpreting it from our point of view. Furthermore, the Wichí themselves often condemn the beliefs of the past as sorcery, often contrasting the past with the present in which they are Christians and ‘new people’. There is nevertheless, as mentioned above, also a different type of discourse about the past, where the past is depicted in more

positive terms (see 5.4), even if the first discourse is predominant (at least while speaking to white people and Mestizos). The denouncement of the past has two probable explanations. The first one is that in the Mestizo culture of the Gran Chaco, a 'Christian' is not just a religious category, but also a social category. In the eyes of the Mestizos, the Wichí are 'people', associated with culture, now that they are Christians, as opposed to the 'Indians' and 'non-people' associated with nature as they were before. The Wichí are still discriminated and ignored to a certain extent, but they do hold a different kind of right and authority, a new voice through the language of the Bible. They now also have allies through the different Pentecostal denominations they are in contact with. Therefore it is important for the Wichí to stress to Mestizos and whites their new Christian status (and with that also to condemn the past).

This does not imply that the Wichí are 'pretending' to be Pentecostals. From their point of view they are Pentecostals; although being so most likely does not mean exactly the same to them as to the Western missionaries. The cosmos of the Wichí is inclusive, which made it relatively easy for them to convert in the first place, but it also means that they do not see Christianity as an exclusive religion (as Christianity today generally tends to see itself). The Wichí on the whole do not see a conflict between being 'real Christians' while simultaneously believing in different Keepers of natural phenomena as, for example, thunder, which can take one's soul away. The Western version of Pentecostalism is not the only right version; it is solely the Western interpretation of it. Interestingly enough, the Wichí adaptation of Pentecostalism seems to be more similar to the original African American Pentecostalism than most of the different branches of Pentecostalism in the West today. The religion of the Wichí has the same core as the religion of the African American slaves had, through the importance of music, and a body and mind relationship evident in healing among many similarities (see section 4.1 and for instance 5.1). When it comes to spirituality, the Wichí may even be more devout Pentecostals than the Western missionaries that brought the belief to the region.

The second reason why the Wichí stress that they are new people could simply be that they believe they are. I think a religious conversion can be seen as a rite of passage (see section 3.2), where people move from an old social stage and status to a new one. People that have gone through a rite of passage or a conversion feel as new people; many Pentecostals that have converted or

received the baptism of the Spirit talk about 'being born again'. I believe this is particularly true when it involves the change from a bad socio- economic situation to one that is (at least symbolically) better. Those converted will then stress the new and higher social status to themselves and to others. As the Wichí in general do not make a strict difference between religious and secular life, when they say they are 'new people' and 'Christians', they quite likely do not just talk about religion, they also mean that they feel empowered through the conversion, through the new voice they have.

One must not forget that the Wichí converted after being under severe pressure over a long period of time. More than one third of the Mataco died of a smallpox epidemic during the end of the 1930's as a result of extended contact with the Mestizos. Wichí shamans were harassed by the authorities, their rituals forbidden, and there was strong pressure on all the Wichí to become Christians. They most likely felt that not just their culture but also their whole existence was at stake. In this situation the conversion to Pentecostalism provided an option. According to Romer's rule (see 3.2), a forced change of a phenomena usually happens in line with earlier essentials. This seems to be the case with the Wichí conversion to Pentecostalism. The situation around them was changing, and they could not continue to live as they had formerly. The Wichí realized Pentecostalism provided an option that meant a change, but a change less fundamental than other possible 'alternatives'.

It is probable that the Wichí would not have accepted a faith that would contradict anything they see as essential to their values. Their cosmology may be inclusive, but that does not mean that it is not selective. The Wichí chose Pentecostalism so they could keep their freedom, to have their religious rituals and healing (which before the conversion were condemned as sorcery), and in general to be left alone by the Mestizos to a greater extent than before, because today the Wichí are Christians, and cannot be harassed as before. The Wichí did not receive Pentecostalism, they chose it, and they did so on their own terms. Most of the Wichí in the area of Las Lomitas did not convert until the beginning of the 1980's when most missionaries were gone, and the faith was spread by Wichí Pentecostals, who adopted the religion from their Amerindian neighbours the Toba. This seems to confirm Kellner's theory that conversion among ethnic minorities is most commonly brought about by other local people (see section 4.3). Starting from the 1980's the ministry of the



Wichí Church was indigenized; the Wichí held the positions of pastors themselves, and could carry out the *cultos* without the help of Western missionaries.

As has been mentioned previously about the Wichí, many of them saw the missionaries as a kind of Keepers of natural phenomena present in the Wichí cosmology. Not only the conversion, but the whole context of the Mestizos move into the Gran Chaco and the arrival of the white missionaries have probably been interpreted from within the Wichí cosmology. According to Alvarsson (personal communication), the Wichí see their allies, the Pentecostals, as more powerful ‘Keepers’ than the allies of the Mestizos (different local representatives of Argentinean authorities). I was most likely seen by the Wichí as part of the ‘Western missionary category’, and thus as possibly influential. Therefore, and perhaps also because I was in different ways a liminal person, I was given a role in the church.

The conversion to Pentecostalism could be interpreted as a tactical choice, but even so, a merging of religions has taken place. The beliefs of the Wichí have also to a certain extent changed, and possibly even taken a step towards Mestizo culture (along Martin’s claims about Amerindian people converting to Pentecostalism, see 4.3), even if the change has not been as dramatic or abrupt as many Wichí claim, or as Mestizos and Western missionaries may think.

The Pentecostal movement stresses the praxis and the experience of religion rather than the theology. Therefore the rituals, the collective baptism or outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the state of *gozo*, become more important than the message of the Pentecostal movement. The conversion of the Wichí is not an abrupt break with the beliefs of the past, as is apparent in the ritual of the *culto*.

The second question I set fourth in this thesis was: How important are religious rituals for the sense of continuity and well being of the Wichí society? According to Durkheim (see 3.1) the main task of ritual, the matrix of religion, is to strengthen group solidarity. I believe this is particularly important in a time of change, as is the case with the Wichí, when old values are challenged and people need to relate to each other and to their common past. I agree with Rappaport, who says that there are virtually no new rituals (see 3.2), as essentially all rituals are based on older ones. This was obvious in many ways in the Wichí Pentecostal service. The *culto* always took place at

night (at least in '42' during my field study), although traditional Pentecostal services take place during the day. Similarly, Wichí shamans would heal and carry out group rituals to scare off evil spirits for the most part at night, and night time is also social time for the Wichí. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the *culto* is also very similar to the possession of the spirit Welán that traditionally initiated shamans, and could make people sing or dance or even faint. A telling example of this is how Ana, the healer, was often most dramatically 'slain to the ground' by the Spirit. The chanting that takes place prior to Ana's healing is also comparable to the calling of helping spirits carried out by traditional shamans.

A clear and dramatic example of continuity (and also change) in Wichí rituals is healing. The healing, which is a vital part of the *culto*, is essentially shamanic healing in a Pentecostal setting. Shamanism and Pentecostal healing share both formal and conceptual elements; they have compatible cosmological ideas, and similar ideas of the person and of illness (see 4.1 and 4.5). In the *culto* I witnessed shamanic laying-on of hands, expulsion of intruding pathogens, and the returning of a lost soul by the healer Ana (see 5.1 and 5.2). An important difference compared to classic shamanic treatment is that the healing in the *culto* was not only carried out by the healer. Everybody present helped to sing or at least clap hands to create the proper atmosphere in church, and sometimes people helped with the laying-on of hands as well. The healing in the *culto* today is collective, which traditional shamanic curing was not. The collectiveness in healing is a Pentecostal influence. Traditionally, all the Wichí had the general right to participate in different activities (see 4.5), and this seems to agree with the collective healing in the *culto* today. The merging of the two religions has led to a change in healing that in certain ways could be seen as closer to Wichí ideals of everybody's right to participate, than their old beliefs, where the exclusiveness of the shaman was an 'undemocratic' element. The healing outside the *culto*, on the other hand, was a more traditional version of shamanic treatment (see 5.3). Ana did not need anybody else for this, even if her sons usually did help her, but she was not dependent on the musicians or the pastor as in the *culto*. The curing was usually carried out at her home, and the only Christian influences (that I noticed) were her prayers to God, but mainly Jesus, before and while she was healing. Otherwise, she used, like in the *culto*, shamanic techniques.

Outside the *culto* there are also other similarities of how a healer or a pastor (who can in general also heal) receives her/his calling. They often inherit the role from an older relative, and they feel pain in their bodies while being initiated, just like the traditional shamans. Also in conversations it sometimes becomes clear that many Wichí have incorporated Christian beliefs into their cosmology. For instance when Félix was talking about the spirit of dancing (see 5.4), which, according to most Pentecostals, does not actually exist, but as dancing is important for the *culto*, Félix saw it as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, Félix did not even talk about gifts of the Spirit, but about 'different Holy Spirits', which would be bordering on blasphemy for most Pentecostals. Certain words were also made 'more familiar' by the Wichí, I realized after a while. They did not actually say 'Dios' ('God'), but 'Lios', and they also said 'inglesia', instead of 'iglesia' ('church'). 'Inglesia' is actually a connection of the two Spanish words 'iglesia' and 'Inglés' ('English'), most likely because the first non-Catholic missionaries in the Chaco were English.

A vital element in Wichí Pentecostalism is the indigenization of practice, which all of the above is an example of. The flexibility of Pentecostalism gave the Wichí the freedom to carry out the *culto* and the healing on their own terms, and interpret the *culto* and the whole faith from their cultural point of view. Without this indigenization of practice, a conversion would possibly not have taken place at all, or it would have perhaps not have gone as quickly as it did. Pentecostalism that was at first a foreign belief to the Wichí with time became the most local religious option (see also 4.3).

As has already been made evident through the collective healing of the *culto*, the Wichí ritual not only incorporated the new into the old, which is important for the sense of continuity in times of change. Other examples of new elements the Wichí have integrated into the *culto* are the Spanish language, Bibles, guitars, the church building, *tiras* etc. Through the incorporation into something they see as their own ritual, the Wichí made these phenomena familiar. The Spanish language, for instance, that earlier had a mainly (if not only) negative association to the Mestizos and the Argentinean society, has now become a more positive element through its connection to the *culto*. In this way the Wichí have also moved possibly closer to the Mestizo society.

Rappaport states that rituals transmit messages better than words (see section 3.3), or can even communicate things that cannot be said through

words, because ritual actions cannot ‘lie’ in the same way that the spoken word can. As in the Wichí case, the words ‘we are new people now and the religion of the past has nothing to do with our new Pentecostal belief’ do to a certain extent ‘lie’ or at least do not tell the whole truth. The ritual, on the other hand, shows that the Pentecostalism of the Wichí is a combination of old and new beliefs and practises.

According to Rappaport, the self referential and the canonical messages of a ritual support and validate each other. This is very clear for many of the Wichí, who see the biblical stories not just as very relevant to their every day lives, but almost as identical to their lives, as illustrated by Félix when he said he believed Jesus was around in Las Lomitas three generations ago. It should, however, be mentioned that not all Wichí had the same opinion about on the matter (see 5.4). Abel, for instance, did not agree with the statement that Jesus had been in Las Lomitas this recently. Abel seemed an exception in religiously related matters. He did not participate in the *culto*, he was critical of how the service was carried out, he read the Bible on his own (which I did not see anybody else do) etc. Although he was not ‘typical’, I believe it is important to show his point of view, to underscore that although there are strong trends in how the Wichí interpret the Bible and Pentecostalism, this does not mean that their opinions are homogenous.

Transformation of communication of values from one culture to another is made possible through symbolic communication, and it is actually easier to communicate if the symbols are ambiguous (see section 3.3). The Anglican and Pentecostal missionaries that first arrived to the Chaco most likely experienced the same communication problems with the Wichí as I did, because of both linguistic and cultural barriers. Yet the missionaries and the Wichí could all participate in the *culto* together (as was my case). Many of the Wichí might not be sure of everything about Pentecostalism, or of all that is written in the Bible, not least because many Wichí do not know how to read, but the whole religion is held together by the ritual of the *culto*. Because of the ritual a homogenous discourse is not needed. Through ambiguous symbols of ritual such as dancing, singing, healing, hyperventilating etc, people can communicate over cultural barriers. Even the words of the Bible can be seen as ambiguous symbols. The canonical message of the Bible is always the same, but the self referential message differs depending on one’s cultural and personal background, as evident in for instance Félix’s interpretation of Bible

stories. And there is even more room for personal interpretation in case a Wichí does not understand Spanish very well. Speaking in tongues could also be seen as a type of symbolic communication, where nobody can actually understand the words uttered, and so everybody can interpret them for themselves. Glossolalia is not unusual in Pentecostal denominations, but I never heard it while I was in field. However, it is quite possible that I did not notice the difference between an 'ordinary' elated prayer in Wichí and speaking in tongues. There were never any missionaries or representatives of the Argentinean denominations of the Pentecostal Church present in the *cultos* during my field work. If they were, they could have participated together with the Wichí in the *culto*, felt included and recognised the ritual as a Pentecostal service. It is in the ritual where the missionaries and the Wichí can relate to each other, paradoxically through the fact that they can interpret happenings differently. Cultural consensus is not necessary for social consensus. In the case of the Wichí, the ritual is truly the matrix of religion, the point of intersection between the old and the new, the Wichí and the missionaries, the local and the global.

The feeling of *gozo* probably cannot be created through words alone, and the ritual has an important part to play here. Music, dancing, singing and the overall atmosphere of the *culto* have a very powerful effect on people, and help to create *gozo*. The ritual also allows the Wichí to behave in ways deviant from the norm by being emotional, loud etc (Turner's anti-structure, see 3.2). This gives them a certain outlet for feelings, possibly of frustration over the Wichí situation in society, and at the same time confirms the rules for every-day behaviour. The separate space of ritual is very different from every-day life, but includes all life, even the every-day life. The ritual and the anti-structure give the participants an arena to dramatize and process the change that has taken place in their society. The liminality of the anti-structure, the *gozo* and the conversion by which the Wichí feel empowered, has led to a state of *communitas* (see 3.2). *Communitas* give people a feeling of equality between everybody, and make them feel that wrongs of the past will be corrected. For example, I was told by the Wichí that Jesus created all humans and that all humans are equal, and that 'the first shall be the last', as a comment on the social order of society (see 5.4). Some of these comments contradict each other, but I believe it is because they are both comments on

the situation in society today, which is not very just, but also on the way things will be in the future, as the Wichí see it.

It is in the ritual of the *culito*, where the Wichí confirm their bonds to each other and remind themselves of their past and present identity. Not just individual persons are healed, but the whole community body. They are allowed to carry out their religious rituals, they can heal themselves, and (unlike before) the Mestizos cannot interfere, which certainly makes the Wichí feel a new pride in who they are. The ritual of the *culito* becomes a bridge between the past and the present, through actual similarities between the shamanic and the Pentecostal ritual, but also by the bond between the people that is recreated and strengthened through the *gozo*. Rituals are not just important for the sense of continuity and well-being of a society, but also, as the symbolic communication of ritual showed, for the actual conversion and successful adaptation of a new faith.

Homan's classic definition of rituals, which states that they do not produce practical results on the external world, does not fit all too well with the Wichí rituals. One can of course discuss the meaning of 'practical', but if the rituals of the Wichí Pentecostal service produce a feeling of *gozo* and unity that strengthens the whole Wichí community, stressing in turn their separate ethnic identity (which is an essential result in itself), it will probably in the long run have 'more concrete' results as well. So even though the rituals do not initially provide any visible, I do not agree with the statement that they do not have any effect on the external world. I believe that Rappaport's definition of rituals, where 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers' is more appropriate for the Wichí Pentecostal service. They perform the ritual of the *culito* each time with similar words and acts, but neither the words nor the acts were entirely defined by the Wichí. It is precisely the fact that the acts and words are not completely determined by the Wichí, (in for instance the coritos that were in Spanish, although not all the Wichí understand Spanish), which leaves the content open for interpretation.

## **7. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

For centuries The Wichí resisted Catholic missionaries and have generally been seen as the Amerindian traditionalists of the Gran Chaco area. Yet, since their conversion to Christianity in the beginning of the 1980's, they seem to

have made a complete turn and have become ‘new people’ and enthusiastic participators of Pentecostal services.

In the Wichí *culto* however, it becomes quite clear that the ‘new’ Pentecostal service, as all ‘new’ rituals, bears many strong similarities to the rituals of the past. The praxis of Pentecostalism has been indigenized. This is particularly apparent through the frequent presence of healing in the *culto*. It is virtually shamanic healing in a Pentecostal setting, where the healer uses the same techniques as the traditional shaman, with the important exception that it is carried out as collective healing. It takes place under the supervision of the healer, but everybody in church is to some extent incorporated into the healing, which was not the case when the role of the shaman was exclusive. Paradoxically, this change may in a way be more in line with the ‘democratic’ values of the Wichí than their old healing practises. Both the old and the new are incorporated in the ritual, and in that way the change taking place in society is symbolized and dealt with, and the Wichí also strengthen their bond to each other through the ritual.

The conversion of the Wichí is not an abrupt break with the beliefs of the past as it may seem at first sight, when one sees the Wichí carrying their Bibles to church, even though, obviously, some changes have taken place. A merging has taken place, where concepts of Pentecostalism have been interpreted to fit with the old cosmology of the Wichí. It becomes apparent that the Wichí in general do not perceive the whole Pentecostal faith, and particularly the ritual of the *culto*, in the same way a Western missionary would. The symbolic communication of the ritual, such as dancing and healing, makes it possible for the Wichí and the missionaries to participate together and relate to each other despite the fact that they each interpret the events from their own cultural perspective. Also, many of the Wichí may not be sure about the theology of Pentecostalism, but the ritual holds the whole faith together to an extent where a homogenous discourse is not needed. The ritual of the Wichí *culto* is the matrix where the known and the less-known, Wichí and white people, shamanism and Christianity, intersect.

As all foragers, the Wichí tend to be very adaptive (they are often ‘new people’), but they also always seem to be able to keep their cultural core, where personal freedom and independence are essential. Before the Wichí converted, they had been under pressure for a long time to give up their shamanic traditions and beliefs. Pentecostalism, with its flexibility and stress

on experience and people's own interpretation of the faith provided a good option for the Wichí. The conversion gave them a greater cultural freedom to hold their religious rituals and with that a chance to continue as 'old people' as well.

The Swedish ethnographer Nordenskiöld (1910), who travelled through the Gran Chaco in the beginning of the 1900's, wrote that unfortunately did he not think that the culture and lifestyle of the Mataco would survive for much longer. A century later, the culture of the Mataco seems after a closer look to be more resistant than most people would have expected, the Mataco are merely good at concealing this fact from strangers.



## GLOSSARY

*'aháát*-(evil) spirits

*'Aháátaj*- chief of all evil

*brujo*- sorcerer

*cancionista*- 'songster', musician

*corito*- religious song

*culto*- worship, Wichí Pentecostal service

*curación*-curing

*encargado*- administrator; assistant to pastor

*gozo*- joy; state of mind produced in the Wichí Pentecostal service

*hiyawu'*- shaman

*la-ka-layís*- helping spirits

*lanzamiento*- throwing, hurling; the jumping kind of dancing performed in the culto

*lhametwo*- 'keeper of the word'; person responsible for reading the Bible among the Wichí

*nohusek*-soul

*not'isan*-body

*ofrenda*- offering

*oración*-prayer

*pastora*-female pastor

*Santa Cena*-Holy Communion

*tiras*-strips, shreds; the white garment some Wichí wear during the culto

*testimonio*-testimony

*W/welán*- spirit that causes possession, particularly when initiating traditional shamans, also a term for the state of mind it produces

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alvarsson, Jan- Åke, 1988, *The Mataco of the Gran Chaco- An Ethnographic Account of Changes and Continuity in Mataco Socio-Economic Organization*. Stockholm: Graphic Systems.
- 1994, Mataco, Wilbert, Johannes (ed.), *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, No. 4. New York: G.K. Hall&Co.
- 1998, Gran Chaco, *Amerikas Indiankulturer*. Stockholm: Elanders Gotab AB.
- 1999, Conversion to Pentecostalism among Ethnic Minorities. Åsa Dalmalm (ed.), *Swedish Missiological Themes*. Vol. 87, No. 3.
- 2003, True Pentecostals Or True Amerindians- Or Both? A Study of a Religious 'Revival' Among the 'Weenhayek Indians of Southern Bolivia. Alvarsson, Jan-Åke & Segato, Rita, Laura (eds.), *Religions in Transition: Mobility, Merging and Globalization in the Emergence of Contemporary Religious Adhesions*. Sweden: Elanders Gotab, Stockholm.
- *Maiden Jazz: African American Roots of [Swedish] Pentecostalism*. March 2005 /in press/
- personal communication, 2005-03-08, Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University
- Anderson, Allan, 2004, *An Introduction To Pentecostalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, Allan, H., 1999, Introduction: World Pentecostalism at a Crossroad. Anderson, Allan, H., & Hollenweger, Walter, J, (eds.), *Pentecostals after a Century- Global Perspectives on a Movement in Transition*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, England.
- Bourdieu, Pierre & Wacquant, Loic J. D., 1992, *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bourdillon, Hilary, 1988, *Women as Healers- A History of Women and Medicine*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Braunstein, José, 2004, 'Indios' and 'cristianos': religious movements among the eastern Wichí. *Acta Americana*. Vol. 11, No. 2: 19-42. Uppsala University Press.
- personal communication, 2003-08-17, Las Lomitas
- Califano, Mario, 1976, *El chamanismo mataco*, Scripta Ethnologica 3, Vol. 2: 7-60.
- Cox, Harvey, 1995, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Cassell.

- Cucchiari, Salvatore, 1988, Adapted for Heaven: Conversion and Culture in Western Sicily. *American Ethnologist*. Vol. 15. No. 1: 417-440.
- Drogus, Carol Ann, 1997, Private Power or Public Power: Pentecostalism, Base Communities, and Gender. Cleary, Edward, L. & Stewart- Gambino, Hannah, W. (eds.), *Power, Politics, and Pentecostals in Latin America*. Boulder (U.S.): Westview Press, A Division of Harper Collins Publishers.
- Durkheim, Emile, 1915, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. London: Unwin Brothers Limited.
- Ellen, R., (ed.) 1984, *Ethnographic research: a guide to general conduct*. London: Academic Press.
- Fock, Niels, 1982, History of Mataco Folk Literature and Research, Wilbert, Johannes/ Simoneau, Karin (eds.), *Folk Literature of the Mataco Indians*. Los Angeles: University of California.
- Giddens, Anthony, 1993, *Sociologi*, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Grubb, Barbrooke, W., 1911, *An Unknown People in an Unknown Land*. London: Seeley & Co. Limited.
- Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J., 1997, Discipline and practise: The field as site, method and location. Akhil Gupta & James Ferguson (eds.), *Anthropological locations: Boundaries and grounds of a field science*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hart, Keith, 1996, The presentations, Ingold, Tim (ed.), *Key Debates in Anthropology*. 1988 debate: Social anthropology is a generalizing science or it is nothing, 17-54. London&New York: Routledge.
- Hefner, Robert, W., 1998, Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in a Globalizing Age. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol. 27: 83- 104.
- Hollenweger, Walter, J. 1999, The Black Roots of Pentecostalism. Anderson, Allan, H., & Hollenweger, Walter, J. (eds.), *Pentecostals after a Century- Global Perspectives on a Movement in Transition*. Sheffield Academic Press, England.
- Jackson, Michael, 1998, Preamble. *Minima ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the anthropological project*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jones, Lindsey (ed.), 2005, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 2. United States of America: Thompson Gale .
- Karsten, Rafael, 1913, La religion de los Indios Mataco-Noctenes de Bolivia, *Anales del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Buenos Aires*, Tomo XXIV: 199-218.

- Laderman, Carol, 1991, *Taming the Wind of Desire- Psychology, Medicine, and Aesthetics in Malay Shamanistic Performance*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lawless, Elaine, J., 1988, *Handmaidens of the Lord*. United States of America: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw, 1999, [1922] Introduction: The Subject, Method and Scope of this Inquiry. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: E.P Dutton.
- Martin, David, 2002, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 1964, *From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss. Signs*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Métraux, Alfred, 1946, Etnography of the Gran Chaco, Steward, Julian (ed.), *Handbook of South American Indians*, Vol. 1: 197-370. Washinton DC: Government printing office.
- Miller, Elmer, S., 1979, *Los Tobas Argentinos- Armonía y disonancia en una sociedad*. Siglo XXI editores, Mexico.
- 1995, *Nurturing Doubt*, Urbana: University of Illinois (U.S).
- (ed.), 1999, *Peoples of the Gran Chaco*. London: Bergin & Harvey.
- Nordenskiöld, Erland, 1910, *Indianlif*. Stockholm: Aktiebolaget Fahlcrantz' Boktryckeri.
- Okely, Judith & Callaway, Helen (eds.) 1992, *Anthropology and autobiography*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Okely, Judith, 1996, Introduction. Judith Okely (ed.). *Own or other culture*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Pandian, Jacob, 1991, *Culture, Religion and the Sacred Self*. Englewood Cliffs (U.S.): Prentice- Hall, Inc.
- Perruchon, Marie, 2003, *I am Tsunki- Gender and Shamanism among the Shuar of Western Amazonia*. Sweden: Studentlitteratur, Lund.
- Rappaport, Roy A., 1999, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roseman, Marina, 1996, Pure Products Go Crazy, Laderman, Carol & Roseman, Marina (eds.), *The Performance of Healing*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Turner, Victor, 1969, *The Ritual Process- Structure and Anti-structure*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca New York.
- Segato, Rita Laura, 2003, Religions in Transition- Changing Religious Adhesions in a Merging World. Alvarsson, Jan-Åke & Segato Rita Laura (eds.) *Religions in*

- Transition- Mobility, Merging and Globalization in the Emergence of Contemporary Religious Adhesions*. Elanders Gotab, Stockholm.
- van Gennep, Arnold, 1960 (1909), *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Werner, Oswald, 2003, Ethnographers, language skills and translation. *Anthropology News*. (March): 7.
- Wright, Pablo, G., 2003, Toba Religiosity: Code-Switching, Creolization or Continuum? Alvarsson, Jan-Åke & Segato Rita Laura (eds.) *Religions in Transition- Mobility, Merging and Globalization in the Emergence of Contemporary Religious Adhesions*. Elanders Gotab, Stockholm.

Internet reference: Hollenweger, Walter, J., February 2005, *Pentecostalism*  
<http://www.epcra.ch/papers/articles/Pentecostalism.PDF>  
(European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association)

## **APPENDIX**

### **Interviews/conversations relevant to thesis, 2003**

- |     |                            |                               |
|-----|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1.  | August 4 <sup>th</sup>     | Félix Velásquez               |
| 2.  | August 5 <sup>th</sup>     | Félix Velásquez, Ana Gómez    |
| 3.  | August 10 <sup>th</sup>    | Félix Velásquez               |
| 4.  | August 11 <sup>th</sup>    | Simón Sarmiento               |
| 5.  | August 11 <sup>th</sup>    | Ana Gómez (Félix translating) |
| 6.  | August 15 <sup>th</sup>    | Ana Gómez (Félix translating) |
| 7.  | August 15 <sup>th</sup>    | Félix Velásquez               |
| 8.  | September 2 <sup>nd</sup>  | Simón Sarmiento               |
| 9.  | September 7 <sup>th</sup>  | Abel Sarmiento                |
| 10. | September 8 <sup>th</sup>  | Simón Sarmiento               |
| 11. | September 9 <sup>th</sup>  | Abel Sarmiento                |
| 12. | September 20 <sup>th</sup> | Remigia Alonzo                |

### **Wichí Pentecostal services (cultos) I attended, 2003**

1. July 27<sup>th</sup>
2. August 1<sup>st</sup>
3. August 3<sup>rd</sup>
4. August 14<sup>th</sup>
5. August 16<sup>th</sup>
6. August 30<sup>th</sup>
7. September 6<sup>th</sup>
8. September 7<sup>th</sup>
9. September 13<sup>th</sup>
10. September 14<sup>th</sup>

## **Magisteruppsatser i kulturanthropologi – ISSN 1653-2244**

1. Levin, Ulf: Mayaness Through Time: Challenges to ethnic identity and culture from the past to modernity, June 2005
2. Berg, Angelica: Oligarkins järnlag – om demokrati i en frivilligorganisation, Juni 2005
3. Tjernström, Hanna: Parents Wishes and Children's Lives – Where Does the Education Lead? Social Change among Young People in West-Central Tanzania, June 2005
4. Hajo, Sirin: En länk till Gud i cd-format? Om qawwalimusiken i rörelse och globaliseringskrafter, Januari 2005
5. Blum, Rebecca: Service or Violence? Or A Violent Service: A fieldwork based study on change in attitudes towards the use of force within the South African Police Service analysed using the community concept, September 2005
6. Molin, John: The Past Is Present: Archeological sites and identity formation in Southern Africa, September 2005
7. Kristek, Gabriela: 'We Are New People Now' – Pentecostalism as a means of ethnic continuity and social acceptance among the Wichí of Argentina, September 2005