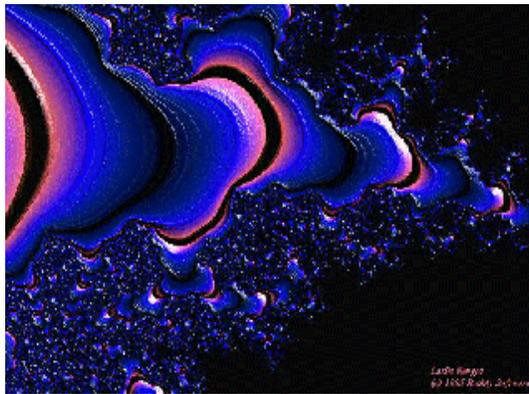


THE MATSE AND THE SACRED



Bennett Blumenberg
ANCIENT HISTORY and RELIGION TIMELINE PROJECT
©1994, 1996, 2006 Blumenberg Associates LLC



Ultimate Transcendence

One of the most extraordinary reports of transcendental experience I

have read is an article by Peter Gorman (1990), a well traveled, knowledgeable journalist who is very astute about the lifestyles of tribal peoples. Gorman describes of the Matse, a tribal agricultural people of the Amazon rain forest who possess a religious experience of great depth that carries a wide philosophical insight and leaves no archeological record. That latter feature should make everyone pause when attempting to puzzle out the 'origins' of ritual and myth. On that account alone, the Matse tells us that the extraordinary mythic art of the European Upper Paleolithic cannot be evidence for the earliest ritual any absolute sense, although this art does represent the earliest known *complex* articulation of mythic imagery on nonperishable materials as well as documentation for several specific ancient deities and complex rituals. Beyond providing a model for transcendental, personalized shamanism without group ritual or metaphoric art, the nature of the Matse's rituals, which were also briefly experienced by Peter Gorman, provide an extraordinary experience within dimensions beyond the familiar 3-D that encompasses our daily lives in this 'world'. Gorman's experience, which confirmed interpretations by the Matse themselves, fits the traditional, scientific model of an hypothesis confirmed by verification of a model's 'predictions'. Gorman had no intentions of performing such an experiment and nowhere in his journalism does he refer to such a concept. Nonetheless with little hesitation, that is what I read into his narrative. The reader should understand that all interpretations in this article are mine should not be attributed to Peter Gorman.

The Matse are a society whose are a tuned to their environment with an exceptional degree of integration and fusion. They articulate a complete oneness with the animals and plants of their forest. Mind expanding drugs catalyzed the transformation of most adults into shamans capable of seeing into the future, conversing with plants and

animals and projecting three dimensional anima. Such access for each individual eliminates the need for a single, exceptional shaman in which to concentrate the sacred for transmission to the tribe. Their individual experience is so complete, so whole and fulfilling, that they have almost no theology or linguistically, articulated mytho-poetics. Mystics of all ages and all times have repeatedly told us that direct experience of 'God' is beyond words and needs no words; theology, philosophy and the intellect are but essential meditation and preparation. The Matse have almost no gods, although they believe the Earth is a benevolent mother (*bi-ram-bo*) who has provided them with the jungle. We see here a simple, basic conception of the Great Goddess as Gaia whom mythographers have always proposed as her earliest form. To the Matse all things have spirit, some stronger than others, and Matse spirit is the strongest. Mystics of all persuasions, and advanced Buddhist philosophy as well, maintain that when ultimate spirituality is achieved, the union with the Void, Great Bliss, or Adamantine Absolute eliminates the need for thought or conceptualization. God will have been found and humans are but a non-local manifestation of the Ultimate Ground. Dualities evaporate and all individuality then ceases.



The Confirmation Model

The Matse do not achieve an ultimate state of mindless transcendental bliss but a fusion with universal life energy which allows them to be active in a rich multi-dimensional 'world'. They repeatedly journey into a world of supra-dimensions and communicate with the future *accurately*. The Matse engage extremely precise communication with the rain forest and its inhabitants while venturing down the future time track (think of it as literally a pathway that can be trod into the future). This experience in the future allows for precise predictions about future events to be made upon return to the present, events are foretold that will occur on our familiar plane of space time. This structure of experience – journey into the future, come back, predict the future in this time track where we all usually live and then watch it unfold as the future comes upon this time track hour by hour - allows for Gorman to obtain an 'objective confirmation' about the details of the Matse hunting journeys into the future. By 'objective', I mean he did not need to rely upon reports from the Matse which were 'after the fact', unconfirmable stories told upon their return from a spiritual journey whose narrative would have to be taken or rejected on faith. Heretofore, such narratives have been almost the only information base available to 'outsiders' to describe and interpret the shamanic 'soul journey' experience. By 'accuracy', I specifically mean that the Matse when returning from spirit journeys make highly specific, detailed predictions about the future, based upon their needs and wishes. Their predictions involve changes in the local ecology and the behavior of both tribal members and animals, all of which are oriented towards a successful hunt. To give a highly simplified example. Upon return from the future as experienced during the ritual taking of *sapo* (see below), a Matse hunter will describe a several day hunt that he shall soon undertake (not always alone), the trail, landmarks, important animal and plant encounters and finally the successful killing of prey. That hunt will then be undertaken, the sequence of events will unfold as

predicted and only the outsider observer Peter Gorman stands aside in amazement. To the Matse of course, this is the way the multidimensional 'world' is. An outside observer is not forced to deal with a data base that is composed of the stories told by shamans or emotional reactions and described psychological changes within people as observed from the 'outside' by western anthropologists. Matse hunting predictions repeatedly 'come true' at a frequency that far exceeds statistical randomness. The Matse journey along a future time track when projecting an *animus*, then return to their body in this world and then proceed to live out the already known future experience.

These extraordinary 'journeys' are verifiable'. The phenomena predicted are not subject to trickery, deceit and manipulation. They either occur, or not, as predicted by hallucinogenic induced travel down the future 'time track' of a distinct reality plane. By contrast, consider shamanic healing by sucking out the cause of disease or the retrieval of 'lost souls'. It is not possible for an outside observer to independently confirm events, only observations of the shaman's behavior and changed state of the 'patient' can be 'seen'. Such shamanic experiences are certainly 'real' in the hands of fully trained masters but such events cannot be independently confirmed as 'real' in the western scientific sense. New Age cultists will sneer at such an approach, or merely define it as beside the point, usually because they are on a fervent quest to shed their Western intellectual heritage and because scientific method is deemed distasteful and narrow. Such an attitude merely sides steps the fundamental philosophical question about the nature of 'reality'. On the other hand, deductive reasoning and scientific method is assumed by many to be the only process by which to investigate the 'world' and 'reality'. It is but one filter and one approach, although it does superbly when confronting the physicality of the universe. This approach also has great value if we wish to investigate the degree of objectivity (which can never be 100%) of a phenomenon and not remain forever mired in ego-oriented, subjective reaction and argument. *The experiences of the Matse seem to establish one dimension of the future as both accessible from the present and objectively real; and the psychic material which we hold in common with all living creatures as also objectively real! The Matse have*

discovered a methodology to repeatedly access this transcendental 'world', then to return to our familiar 'world' with predictions that verify their experiences in that 'other plane of reality'. They have transformed their daily life style into one that continually experiences transcendence, an opening of higher dimensional doorways. They experience a continual exploration of human potential in a fashion that can only be described as optimized and maximized.

There is no pantheon of deities and no cosmology in Matse mytho-poetics, although a rather ill defined mother goddess is present. The integration of their experience with the spirit force of every living thing, brings the experience that most other cultures seek from a relationship with the gods.¹ I believe they create no art in the service of their religion because there are no *group* rituals oriented towards contacting the gods. However, to label the outward manifestations of their religious activities as primitive is pejorative and misses the point entirely. The Matse repeatedly achieve a mystical experience which the disciples and adepts of all civilizations, past and present, have struggled deeply to attain.



¹ The Matse experience should *not* be taken to indicate the gods do not exist, merely that the Matse have no need of them.

Warfare and Aggression

The Matse are semi-nomadic hunter gatherers of the South

American rain forest whose traditional territories stretched west from the Yivari to the Ucayali rivers and from the Rio Tapiche to just south of the Amazon. Most of this territory lies within Peru. They traded with Spanish missions as early as 1654 but sustained contact with non-Indians did not occur until the late 1800's with rubber tappers and skin traders. Since the 1920's the Matse have been subjected to a continual cultural onslaught as Europeans, particularly rubber tappers, brought disease, enslavement and warfare. Some have left missionary settlements and resumed their traditional lifestyle in the forest such as the group Peter Gorman contacted and spent considerable time with in the 1980s. Indeed, the rituals reported here may no longer exist.

It is important to realize that the Matse, as well as numerous other South American rain forest semi-nomadic hunter gatherers, are aggressive and warlike. Such group behaviors did not start as a response to European incursions but are deeply embedded traditions with mythic meaning. The Matse practiced exo-cannibalism until recently; i.e. the eating of outsiders - enemies. They still practiced exo-cannibalism when Gorman visited them. By eating the flesh of their dead, they believe they will become stronger and the spirit of the dead will live on inside of them. The warfare conducted by Amazonian tribes leaves no archeological record; weapons are made of wood. Villages are not fortified or located in obviously defensive localities. Such observations suggest great caution in inferring the presence or absence of aggression and warfare from an archeological record as has been done with reference to European societies that were not Indo-European (Gimbutas 1989, 1991). Granted the plant and amphibian species that provide lethal poisons for arrow heads and spear points are absent in the ecosystems of Old Europe. In particular, there is no equivalent to the tree frogs whose secretions are highly hallucinogenic and toxic, although some dangerous plants such as

hemlock, the hallucinogenic fly agaric mushroom and a few poisonous berries and mushrooms are present in the Eurasian ecosystem. Nonetheless, fire hardened spears made of hardwoods are potentially lethal, as are well harpoons and arrows. The majority of tribal hunters observed first hand over the past century and a half did not rely upon poison to effect a kill. That approach is only easily accessible and common in the rain forest where the requisite molecules are available as plant products or amphibian secretions.

If the style and technology of Old European warfare were as follows, it would be virtually undetectable in the archeological record.

1) Primary weapons, such as spears, clubs, bows and arrows, made of fire hardened wood.

2) Small scale raiding parties whose objectives were to perpetuate a feud, protect territorial boundaries. 'Count coup' (touching the enemy in battle confers great status), or simply to capture slaves and women. Another objective might be to capture a few enemies to eat and thereby acquire the power of their spirits. Enemies killed or cannibalized need not be buried.

A further reduction in warfare visibility is provided by the density of undergrowth in a rain forest and the fact the highly acidic soils will destroy nearly any object before fossilization or natural preservative processes can complete their work. Northern latitude rain forests such as those on the northwest coast of North America still do exist.



Daily Life - Daily Transcendence

The Matse revere the jaguar above all animals because they are

Amazonian hunter - gatherers. To look like the jaguar is to embody its spirit, guile and strength.² Adults decorate themselves with a facial tattoo that emulates a feline's grin. Men wear long palm splints embedded in their upper lip. The women wear long reeds in their noses to represent jaguar whiskers. Women also embed long reeds in their lower lip to symbolize prey hanging from the jaguars mouth. Thick red bands across their forehead and eyes assure keen eyesight and invisibility in the forest. The 'magical' dye is extracted from the urucu pod and is applied to arrows to increase their accuracy, and to spears to promote distance in flight.

Peter Gorman began visiting the Matse in 1984, both witnessing and participating in shamanic practices concerned with hunting. The term 'shamanic' seems inappropriate to describe the Matse rituals because there is no single, 'special' person who is a shaman. Induction of a trance state which allows for contact and communication with animal spirits is but one component of overall shamanic activity. Gorman (1990) also calls the plant drugs that the Matse take 'medicines', which they assuredly are not. No illness is being diagnosed or cured during the experiences that follow their ingestion, be it physical or spiritual.

These semantic points aside, the experiences he reports fit within the western paradigm for a testable scientific hypothesis.

1) The mechanism underlying the observable phenomena can be identified and at least partially explained.

2) A predictive model is presented that purports to explain the generalized behavior of the 'system', both in the past and future.

3) The predicted behavior of the system is observed and confirmed, thereby confirming the validity of the mechanism proposed (that generates predictions about the future), as well as the underlying assumptions.

² Identification with human role models partakes somewhat of the transcendent identification acted out within a mythic structure.

4) A *confirmed* hypothesis is no longer a hypothesis; it is a working model. Underlying mechanisms have been identified, and although they may not be entirely understood, they do reveal processes that *have predictable 'effects'*.

The Matse take two hallucinogens to increase their hunting effectiveness and allow them to interact with animal spirits in a dimension of existence that cannot be perceived from the usual vantage point in our familiar present of mundane, secular, space-time. *Nu-nu* is a fine green powder made from the leaves of wild tobacco mixed with ash from the inner bark of the *macambo* tree. Its use is restricted to men and it is taken as snuff. It is not only used in hunting, but also for curing diseases, both physical and spiritual (a distinctly shamanic practice); sometimes it is used for celebration or just to get a good night's sleep after a bad day.

Sapo is made from the secretions of a large banded tree frog mixed with human saliva. The back and legs of the frog are gently scraped and then the unharmed frog is released. The preparation is burned into the skin, a process that must accelerate absorption into capillaries. Gorman (1993) recently reported his first hand observations of the frog, known as *dow-kiet!*, and the gentle procedure used by the Matse to collect *sapo*. Vittorio Erspamer, a pharmacologist who worked with the Fidia Research Institute for the Neurosciences identified the *dow-kiet!* as *Phylomedusa bicolor*, a rare arboreal frog.³ His biochemical assay of *sapo* identified seven families of bioactive peptides: bradykinins, tachykinins, caerulein, sauvagine, tryptophyllins, dermorphins, and bombesins. These peptides account for the physical effects Gorman experienced. Caerulin and phyllocaerulin have a strong effect on the smooth muscle of the gastrointestinal track and on gastric and pancreatic secretions [enzymes] as well. Side effects include nausea, vomiting, heart palpitations, changes in blood pressure, sweating, abdominal discomfort and the urge to defecate. Caerulin produces an analgesic effect and reduces hunger and food intake. One of the tachykinins, phylomedusin contributes to violent

³ *Phylomedusa bicolor* is now known to be used by several tribes closely related to the Matse.

purging by defecation. Sauvagine causes a long lasting fall in blood pressure accompanied by tachycardia and stimulation of the adrenal cortex, all of which contribute to satiety, heightened sensory perception, and increased stamina. Phyllokinin, one of the bradykinins, is a potent dilator of blood vessels which would account for the intense rushing sensations experienced by Gorman during the early effects of *sapo*. Erspamer speculated that the severity of blood dilation might increase the permeability of the blood brain barrier so that other active peptides would have increased access to the brain. A team at the National Institutes of Health identified a 33 amino acid peptides in *sapo* which they named adrenoregulin. Adrenoregulin manipulates cellular receptors in the brain for the binding of adenosine analogs. These receptors are targets involved in the complex biochemical pathways that underlie a diversity of emotional and cognitive functions. Researchers are investigating the use of the active peptides in *sapo* for their potential benefits in treating cancer, renal colic, depression, stroke, seizures and Alzheimer's disease.

Gorman not only heard the Matse describe their visions in detail, but he also *heard them give precise predictions of future events that subsequently unfolded exactly as predicted. Gorman then had the same experiences as the Matse when he took sapo.* His reporting of the psychic machinery involved (the mechanism behind the model) and the witnessing of future experiences utilizes two bodies of data: 1) information obtained as an outside 'objective' western observer who as a journalist was trained – as much as possible to observe dispassionately; and 2) information gleaned from personal experience after taking the drugs. The events (objects in the 'world') generated by the mechanism are, of course, primary transcendental experiences that focus upon communication with animal spirits and the witnessing of events in future time.

The visions and predicted events involve matters of immediate practical concern. There is no quest for mystical experience for its own sake; that is a phenomenon that arose within complex civilizations that created a niche for philosophical contemplation for its inherent abstract beauty, not as an asset to acquire essential calories. The Matse are deeply interested in where desired prey might be found and how they might be killed. Visibility at ground level in a rain forest is greatly reduced, which creates a problem of considerable difficulty and importance to hunting. *When nu-nu opens up the future time track for spirit journeys, a Matse hunter journeys into the forest to meet animals and communicate the Matse need for food. He watches some animals die with great specificity as to time, place and weapon, and then knows how to proceed in his hunt during the coming days. Confirmation of the vision is obtained by living out the scenario in the mundane 'real' world after the effects of the drug have worn off. The hunter proceeds on a hunt and follows the exact scenario revealed in his vision; no detail of travel, time, weapons and traps is ignored. Matse hunters repeatedly obtain the kill revealed in the vision and during the unfolding of events, which often last several days, many secondary details over which they have no control happen exactly as revealed. (At such and such a time at a particular place a wild boar ran across the path and disappeared behind a large tree, etc.) The unfolding of the revealed scenario in secular time provides the 'objective' confirmation; no other interpretation is possible. The experience revealed under the influence of nu-nu when the future time track was opened is subsequently repeated in this 'world' when the hunter goes into the forest after his prey. The Matse say that the animal spirits also saw the vision and willingly sacrificed some of their numbers for human consumption.*

When hunting is poor even with the use of *nu-nu*, the more powerful *sapo* is utilized. *Sapo* is applied as a paste to a burned area on the skin about the size of a matchhead and the effect is instantaneous: body heating, blood and pulse pounding, loss of control over bodily functions and, above all, a sensation that animals are passing through one's body

and trying to express themselves through you.⁴ The blood pounding becomes overwhelming. In about fifteen minutes the hunter passes out and undergoes a brief dreamless sleep. He then awakens to a new persona in which every sense and physical ability is heightened. He can run through the jungle for hours without tiring and not eat for several days.⁵ The spirit Gorman witnessed manifested during the tapir trapping season, a month long period from December into January. The hunter restricts his diet, abstains from sex and takes massive doses of *sapo*. No other animals will be harmed for they might talk to the tapir and warn of the hunt.⁶



Daily Life - Daily Transcendence - Walk the Time Track into the Future

⁴ This description is akin to the classic experience of descent and possession by a god. It is also reminiscent of what channellers believe they experience. Perhaps an accelerated, compressed channeling of animal spirits might be one description of the Matse experience.

⁵ Tibetan monks have also been observed performing these same feats of endurance during long distance journeys. In their case, no drug taking is believed to be involved.

⁶ Worms, grubs and termites cannot talk. The turtle keeps to itself and talks little. The sloth talks so slowly that by the time it is finished, rivers have fallen, lagoons dry up and trapping time is over.

The hunter begins by searching for marshy terrain preferred by tapirs. When footprints are found, he looks for a path between two trees while making tapir sounds. A wooden spike is made and covered with leaves. A pole is fixed on one side of the path with a tripod opposite so that when sprung, the spike will enter the animal behind the front legs and below the rib cage so as to pierce the heart. While working, he warns other animals to stay away; this place is for *his friend* - the tapir. When done, he chews leaves and spits them out across the trip-vine so that his *animas* may find the trap at night. The hunter will not return until spring.

Prior to a hunt, a Matse hunter will take as many as 12 doses of *sapo* each day and *nu-nu* at night in order to project his *animas* and he will find out when the trap will be sprung. Up to five traps will be set by each hunter, but there is a self-imposed bag limit of three tapir. Any more would be greedy and bad spirits would drive the tapir away. Unused traps are dismantled by older sons or brothers. Not every hunter has the physical stamina to utilize repeated doses of *sapo*.

While in the company of a hunter named Tumi, Gorman ingested both drugs and then witnessed two *sapo* and *nu-nu* visions that were then confirmed during a single trip. Tumi and Peter Gorman journeyed a full day to a place where Tumi had seen seven sloths in a *nu-nu* vision. Three sloths were there. *Sapo* visions had told him about a trap three hours from camp being that would be sprung at daybreak the following morning. *That is exactly the event witnessed by Tumi and Gorman!* There is no possibility of deception here. Tumi experienced and described the visions immediately after they occurred, long before the predicted events were to take place.

The Matse also believe if you cannot communicate with plants, they will not reveal their secrets and you cannot cure with them even if their secrets have been explained. The *spirit* of the plant is its real power.⁷



⁷ The Matse language has a vocabulary of about 1,000 words, with more than 300 for plants and animals. Single words often encompass whole concepts. Matse cannot articulate complex explanations unless individuals are partially acculturated and have learned Spanish (Gorman 1990: footnote 8). However in their traditional culture, they do not need complex explanations. They are able to integrate frequently with the spirit world at large and thereby experience *directly* a widening and maximization of dimensions, life forms and creative capacity. They have no need to be analytical in depth because they *live* in a multidimensional world.

Conclusions

Hypothesis: *Nu-nu* and *sapo* allow the Matse to experience the future, and communicate with the spirits of plants and animals. Specific predictions that constitute scenarios for hunting in a future time are captured while walking the future time track under the influence of *sapo*. These predictions then manifest as experiences that occur in this 'world' when the hunter soon thereafter follows the trail and signs that were revealed to him when in the future, and he then concludes his journey with the successful hunt that was foretold.

Results: The hypothesis appears confirmed. The predicted hunting scenarios do occur when the future arrives in our segment of space-time in this 'world'.

Therefore:

- 1) The future exists before it arrives in our 'world'.
- 2) The time track is an accessible pathway. An individual may leave the present and go forward into the future with the facilitation of hallucinogenic drugs. (The recall of past lives also suggests that one may go backward into the past.) The overall experience of many cultures establishes that mediation devices to promote these possibilities need not rely on drugs, although many people have explored such devices.
- 3) *Nu-nu* and *sapo* allow the *animas* to journey into the future. They open a gateway into the spirit world of both plants and animals *and* also a gateway into the real future which has not yet arrived in our 'world'. Why these two gateways are linkable is an extremely important question about which nothing can be said at this time. Some of the Matse communication with plant and animal spirits does not involve projecting an *animas* into the future.
- 4) The mechanism is mysterious and not visible. The drugs obviously lower and open gateways that were closed but exactly where and how is not apparent. The exciting implication is that the gateways

exist outside of ourselves and are physically real. They might usually be invisible because three dimensions is not an adequate enough space-time structure to encompass their properties, thereby making the future accessible and communication with plants and animals possible. Yet the drugs must also have profound effects on human neurophysiology in order to expand awareness so dramatically.

An alternative hypothesis for the locality of the future and the process of spirit communication is that it all resides in our heads. This would seem a position akin to that of Tantra and Buddhist philosophy; *maya* - illusion - creates all including the gods and the phenomenal world. It seems impossible that a real, predictable and ultimately confirmable future begins by residing solely inside our brains, yet somehow can transpose itself to the 'outside' by the time it arrives in our familiar world, indeed, how could this 'internally generated future' transport itself from our mind to *become* a complete, tangible, dynamic environment that is objectively external to ourselves.?



☯ ? ☯ ? ☯ ? ☯ ? ☯ ? ☯ ? ☯ ? ☯ ?

References:

Gimbutas, M. 1989. *The Language of the Goddess*. New York: Harper and Row.

Gimbutas, M. 1991. *The Civilization of the Goddess*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.

Gorman, P. 1990. "People of the Jaguar: Shamanic Hunting Practices of the Matses." *Shamans Drum* No.21: 40-49.

Gorman, P. 1993. "Making Magic". *Omni* 15(9) July, pp. 65-67, 86-87.