8

"I Discovered My Sin!": Aguaruna Evangelical Conversion Narratives

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Ducitak, a grandmother, began:

> I used to be *tudau* ("sinful"), *pegkegchau* (bad). I did many bad things *Apajui* (God) does not like. When I heard the word of *Apajui*, I discovered *(dekawamiajai)* my sin (*tudau*), what I am. I said, "truly I am going to the place of fire *(jiinumap)*." Thinking of this, I wept much. And so I "contracted myself" *(sujumankamiajai)* to *Jisucristui*. Then I began to obey the word.

In the 1970s, many Aguaruna-Jívaro villages of northern Peru temporarily saw a majority convert to evangelical Christianity under the influence of Aguaruna evangelists. By the time of my field research (1987–1989), the number of active converts had stabilized at 10 percent to 30 percent in many villages. Aguaruna assistants helped me tape, transcribe, and translate thirty-four conversion narratives that form the base for this chapter.

The concept of sin seems to play a key role in Aguaruna conversion to Christianity. William James (1902) argued that a "sense of sin" accompanies a certain kind of personality characterized by a "sick soul" or a "divided" self. This sense of sin predisposes people to religious conversion but is itself simply a personality trait, apparently unconditioned by prior beliefs, symbols, and discourses. Others (e.g., Proudfoot 1985) argue that belief is prior to and constitutive of experience, and that only where people have been fully socialized to Christian beliefs is it possible to have a fully Christian conversion experience, complete with a "sense of sin." Indeed, anthropologists have sometimes implied that indigenous peoples, lacking such prior socialization, are unlikely to be moved by "sin discourses" (Kroeber 1948: 612; Mead 1949: 126, 164, 277; Sahlins 1996: 425)—and thus unlikely to experience genuine religious conversion to Christianity.

"Sin" does play a part in Aguaruna conversion narratives—with most narratives containing the same basic elements found in Ducitak's account above. However, they typically present preconversion lives as ones without prior socialization to Christian ideas and without a sense of sin. Puanchig, in his fifties, says, "In the times before following *Apajui* . . . I did not sense myself (*dakaptsaijai*) to be a sinner (*tudau*) and did not feel that what I did was bad." The idea of self as sinner is presented as an emergent understanding triggered by hearing the "word of *Apajui.*" Nuwakuk, in her forties, says: "[When] they announced the word of Apajui, I discovered about myself (*dekagmamawamiajai*) that I was a sinner." Old man Wampagkit says that upon hearing "the word of Apajui . . . I saw/discovered (*wainmamkamiajai*) my sin (*pegkegchaujun*)." The theme of lacking a sense of sin is followed by an emergent discovery of self as sinner and by vigorous affirmations of the self as sinner: "Truly I am a sinner (*tudaunuk*)!" "I was very much of a sinner!" "I was very evil (*katseknuk*)!" "I am going to tell you how I worked badness (*pegkegchaun*)!" "I used to work much sin."

A sense of sin is emergent immediately prior to, or as an accompaniment to, conversion. It does not appear to have preexisted as a core personality trait or to have been structured by extensive prior socialization to Christian beliefs and practices. It is this emergent sense of self as sinner that I explore in this chapter. How are we to understand the statement "I discovered my sin"?

THE VOCABULARY OF SIN

When Aguaruna Christians characterize themselves as *pegkegchau*, *tudau*, *katsek*, *yajau*, *antuchu*, or *tsuwat*, they are using everyday vocabulary. Anything ugly, deformed, dirty, bad-tasting, damaged, or worthless is *pegkegchau*—"bad." Applied to people, it is a term of moral condemnation. Those who are thieves, adulterers, slanderers, stingy, lazy, or incestuous are labeled *pegkegchau*. *Tudau* carries exclusively moral connotations and is used to characterize anyone engaged in active transgressions like incest, bestiality, wife-beating, adultery, sexual exhibitionism, theft, and, above all, complaining about food one's wife or mother has prepared. It is not used for stigmatized but less active character traits like stinginess, gluttony, or laziness. *Katsek* has the underlying idea of "damage." It is used when one breaks a pot or burns down a house, whether accidental or not. But it is also used for adultery, theft, slander, homicide, fighting, and most disapproved behaviors—with the implication that these are socially damaging. *Yajau* is used of those who are cruel, brutish, malicious, or without normal moral sentiments. One who is *yajau*, I was told, maliciously kills his neighbor's animals, offers his sister to a passing stranger, molests women, carves images of female genitals along paths, and beats his mother, wife, child, or dog when angry. *Antuchu* means "doesn't listen" but is used to characterize anyone rebelling against right order. *Tsuwat* literally means "dirty" but is continually invoked in moral discourse. Slander is *tsuwat chicham* ("dirty speech") and the slanderer *tsuwat wenintin* ("one with a dirty mouth"). *Tsuwat anentaintin* ("one with a dirty heart") is someone who outwardly pretends good moral sentiments but is inwardly malevolent. One who "works filth" (*tsuwat takaamu*) is committing adultery or stealing.

"Discovery of sin" for Aguaruna is not a result of new vocabulary being learned. Contemporary Aguaruna Christians, like Old Testament Jews and New Testament Christians, employ multiple words from everyday moral discourse to speak of moral defect and failure. No Aguaruna, Hebrew, or Greek term has the distinctively religious connotations of our English word "sin." Theirs are everyday terms of moral disapproval that are also employed in religious discourse. The prior existence and deployment of such vocabulary in everyday moral discourse is a necessary, but not sufficient, precondition for the "sense of sin" found in Aguaruna conversions.

THE CONTENT OF MORAL IDEAS

But if the "discovery of self as sinner" is not contingent on new vocabulary, might it not be contingent on new moral ideas that reframe formerly innocent behaviors as sinful?

Conversion narratives touch on various sins. Sexual transgression is often mentioned: "I, with women, have worked much sin." Homicide figures prominently: "I killed two people, and then another, and another and another. Altogether I have killed five." Slander, mockery, and threat are often mentioned: "I mocked other people." "I spoke many bad words!" Sometimes bad thoughts are mentioned: "I thought many bad thoughts!" Wife-beating and theft are periodically referred to. And the sin of drinking or getting drunk from manioc beer is a constant refrain. As these are described, narrators occasionally voice the idea that formerly they did not see these as sinful. In the context of describing his own homicides, one Christian says, "I saw the killing which we Aguaruna do, and I thought it was good." In the context of listing his sins ("Drinking manioc beer, I beat my wife, and was a killer."), Puanchig stressed, "I did not understand that what I did was evil."

The sins converts referred to tended to be ones already traditionally disapproved. There are two clear exceptions to this. Traditionally manioc beer was a core staple, drunk from childhood. Mamai claimed that, as a child, she was told, “When we *nampeamu* (drink/party) without fighting, this makes Apajui happy.” Although no other informant attributed such a sentiment to God, Mamai accurately captures the traditional emphasis. Manioc beer is a source of joy and pleasure. Moral warnings were against fighting, slandering, and pursuing affairs while drinking, not against drinking per se. Here, the moral message of evangelists, under the influence of Nazarene missionaries, was a teetotaler message. Drinking was reconfigured as core to other evils.

Dati, a leading Aguaruna evangelist, told a story of Satan (*Iwanch*) sacrificing a turkey, jaguar, and pig and pouring their blood over the plants from which alcoholic beverages derive. Satan’s curse was that people who drink too much will get puffed up and proud like a turkey, then mean and bad tempered like a jaguar, and finally lie unconscious in their own filth on the ground. The audience laughed uproariously, and the story was retold all afternoon. Clearly, it was felt to reflect experienced realities. Aguaruna Christians describe preconversion lives where they frequently awoke after a *nampet* (drinking party) with shame, anger, and fighting. My observations and Harner’s (1972: 110) support this description. But although most mark their conversion, in part, by their break with manioc beer, many subsequently modified their emphasis to an ethic of limited consumption—claiming to preach only what the ancestors taught: “Don’t get drunk and fight.” On another occasion, I heard Dati translating for a mestizo preacher. When he preached against the sin of drinking beer, Dati stopped translating and said forcefully, “We don’t preach that here! You can preach against getting drunk, but not against drinking.” Dati, himself a teetotaler, no longer preaches a teetotaler message. Many pastors have followed his lead. And yet conversion narratives usually treat the break with manioc beer as core.

The second marked contrast with preconversion morality concerns attitudes toward *ikmat*—“revenge.” Traditional moral discourse focused on a rhetoric of *diwi*, or “debt.” Every death had to be avenged, thereby canceling the debt. Under Aguaruna ideology, adult deaths were due either to physical violence or to witchcraft (witches in this culture being male). And since every death had to be avenged, homicide rates were high among Jivaroan groups. According to Michael Brown’s (1984: 197) study, 37 percent of adult male deaths were due to homicide—which he says is lower than in the past. Jane Ross’s study of the less acculturated Achuar-Jívaro found that 59 percent of adult male deaths were due to homicide, significantly higher than rates (21 percent and 41 percent) reported for the Yanomami (Ross 1980: 46). When an Aguaruna Christian says, “I saw the killing which we . . . do, and thought it was good,” he accurately reflects traditional sentiment. Aguaruna homicide is motivated by indignation and justified as a righteous act of righting a prior wrong. Every killer’s narrative begins with some other person’s unjustified homicide, which the killer is rectifying through a fully righteous act of *ikmat*—which cancels the *diwi.* Since homicides were normally carried out by a group of men, each spearing or shooting into the body and sharing credit for the killing, and since male standing was directly dependent on participating in such violent acts, most older men have participated in multiple killings. (For fuller treatment of Aguaruna homicide, see Priest 1993: 244–353.)

Conversion narratives stress radical renunciation of a retaliatory ethic. As evangelists stressed, "Unless you forgive others, Apajui will not forgive you." Wishu comments, "I did not know forgiveness until I followed Apajui. Those who do me harm, I know Apajui will punish, so I do not worry." And again, "When my wife was unfaithful, and when they killed my brother, I made no threats. I just told it to Apajui alone." Dawai says, "My wife had an affair . . . but I did not beat her. I treated her well." Albino describes a man beating him up for an imagined offense: "I did not retaliate. I only said, 'brother, I reply in the name of Apajui. In vain you do this, but I forgive you.'" Some traditionalists complain bitterly that pastors "protect witches" from being killed. Pastors defend accused witches not because they disbelieve the witchcraft charge, but because God alone has the right to avenge a death. When one old man, Wampagkit, went blind, others attributed it to witchcraft and asked his authorization to retaliate against the witch. He refused, saying, "If my enemy has harmed me, Apajui will defend me when he comes."

When Aguaruna converts identify *nampet* (drinking/partying) or homicide and other retaliatory acts as sins they have repented of, it appears that the "discovery of self as sinner" is at least partially based on a recoding as sinful of what was formerly approved. This does not fully explain the emergent sense of self as sinner, however, since a majority of confessed sins are of a sort already disapproved of within traditional culture.

BEFORE GOD

Elderly converts report minimal knowledge of Apajui prior to conversion. Mamai says, "In former times we did not know of Apajui. The old ones just said, 'Apajui made the earth, and he lives. He will destroy it.'" Apajui is featured in two traditional myths. In one, Apajui and Kumpanam lived on opposite cliffs where the Marañon River cuts through the last ridge of mountains. Apajui forbade Kumpanam from looking at his daughter. When Kumpanam disobeyed, thus impregnating Apajui's daughter, Apajui left in anger for the sky. In another myth, Apajui comes to Earth, dirty and hungry, seeking lodging. He is mocked and turned away. In anger, he announces a flood. One family extended hospitality, so he told them to build a balsa raft, put dirt on it, plant crops, and build a house. The incestuous and those who killed "in vain" (without justification) were excluded. Contact with the rain by any who committed incest resulted in their flesh liquefying. Adults were not to look at the sky, lest they die. As the water rose, threatening to crush them against the sky, children who were sexually innocent were told to put a staff through the roof and tap three times on the sky—at which point Apajui caused the waters to recede.

The first of these myths corresponds to myths reported around the world of a high god who withdraws from humankind after some transgression. The second corresponds to similar flood myths reported in traditional societies around the world. Whether or not such stories antedate or reflect European influences, they were deeply entrenched as traditional stories prior to the first sustained presence of missionaries in the late 1920s.

Missionaries initially rejected Apajui as a term for God and used "Tatayus"—a hybrid from Spanish and Quechua. But in the early 1960s, when converts were observed addressing Apajui in prayer, missionaries concluded that Apajui was an acceptable term for God. By the time of my fieldwork, Tatayus was seldom mentioned.

The emergent sense of sin reported by Aguaruna converts is directly dependent on discourses about Apajui, discourses reporting on "words" understood as those of Apajui. Wampagkit describes his early life,

> I lived in vain. . . . I was a *nampen* (drinker/partier), and a fighter. When someone would be killed I would participate. My one desire was to be *Kakajam*. I would mock other people. Living like this, I was happy. . . . I was not following Apajui. Why? Because there was no one yet announcing the word of Apajui. At that time I heard those who were announcing the word of Apajui, a good word. And so I too followed Apajui. There I saw/discovered (*wainmamkamiajai*) my sin (*pegkegchaujun*). I said, "It is true. I have done that which Apajui does not like." And so I followed *apu Jisusan.*

REVERSING THE DIRECTION OF MORAL ACCUSATION

If one compares traditional moral discourses against those of Christian converts, there does not appear to be a significant increase in the sheer number of times that words of moral accusation occur. But there is a shift in *where* accusation is directed. Traditionally, it is almost always directed against an "other," virtually never against "self." Some cultures encourage the individual to attribute misfortune to one's own moral failure ("moral causal ontology"), whereas others ("interpersonal causal ontology") locate the source of misfortune in another's evil (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park 1997:

120–23). Aguaruna culture exemplifies the latter. That is, virtually every misfortune triggers the quest for a guilty "other."

Under Aguaruna ideology, a witch may be unaware he is a witch. But his envy, hatred, anger, resentment, jealousy, and animosity toward another have the mystical power to inflict sickness and death. In a typical scenario, when someone is dying, a diagnostic process commences that includes social assessments of the sentiments of neighboring men toward the dying person. Of course, in a face-to-face community, where neighboring men have competed for the few marriageable women, where individuals have cuckolded one another, where some consistently have abundant food while others suffer with less, and where gossip stirs resentments, animosities, and remembered grudges, there will often be many whose known or suspected sentiments make them prime suspects. And since every death must be avenged, every impending death triggers a diffuse anxiety over who will be blamed as witch and killed. A few weeks earlier, many may have clearly demonstrated envy, anger, or resentment toward a healthy individual. As illness brings this person close to death, however, the whole community shifts dramatically into a mode of absolute solidarity with the victim, with vigorous pronouncements of righteous indignation against the evil witch and a proclaimed willingness to avenge the death of "my brother." Each individual denies any witch-like sentiments within the self, adopts a moral stance of righteous indignation, and joins in a communal act of identifying some other individual as the sole repository of evil who must be eliminated by a righteous act of homicide. People kill witches for the very traits often exemplified in their own lives.

Although witch discourse is only one part of moral discourse, it exemplifies a consistent tendency of traditional Aguaruna discourse to apply terms of moral evil to "others" and almost never to "self." "I discovered my sin!" is notable, not for its moral vocabulary but for directing the accusing words against the self. Conversion narratives, in agreement with the judgment of Apajui, direct words of moral accusation against the self in a fundamental divergence from patterns in the traditional culture. Conversion narratives name the sins of the self in a context of repentance, confession, and renunciation.

FEAR AND TREMBLING BEFORE GOD

Mamai's reference to Apajui destroying the earth doubtless draws on the flood myth and on the belief that earthquakes are sent by Apajui. In 1928, between May and December, there was a series of earthquakes and aftershocks in this region measuring up to 7.3 on the Richter scale. I recorded numerous Aguaruna accounts of this, including eight eyewitness accounts. Aguaruna accounts describe landslides, salt springs pouring into rivers and killing fish, and crevasses splitting houses in half. Night animals called out in daytime, and day animals at night. Children were told not to "mock them." People gathered in large homes. They spoke in whispers. It was said Apajui was angry and would destroy people for being *tsuwat*—dirty. Rumors spread that women who had killed their infants would be eaten by worms. No one should have sex lest Apajui be angry. The incestuous and those who had killed unjustifiably were to be socially excluded lest everyone be destroyed. The flesh of the incestuous would dissolve into liquid. Some said a flood would destroy the world. Apajui, it was said, would send his chicken as a test. Narrators report that animals (e.g., opossum, anteater, armadillo, cat, and turkey) entered homes and acted tame. These were said to be the "animals of Apajui," which should be cared for, fed, and released, lest Apajui be angry. People danced and sang to Apajui, asking why he created them if he is now destroying them. "For what sin (*tudau*) do you now destroy us?" They asked for pity and called attention to their crying children or whimpering dogs. Later, the consensus emerged that this dancing must be done nude. Men and women undressed and danced, facing away from each other, holding up babies or puppies as they looked to the sky and asked for pity: "Apajui, you see all of me, as I was born. Have pity. Have pity on my crying baby." As they danced, the earthquake calmed. Men and women were not to look at each other, but some "bad men" did not fear and looked at women, or reached out to touch them. Each time this happened, the earthquake would start again. Adults eventually tired. The children now sang and danced, puppies held up to Apajui. In some accounts, only when the children danced, did the quakes stop. This event resulted in no lasting religious changes, but the story, frequently retold, highlights Apajui as one who brings judgment.

Fear of judgment by Apajui clearly contributes to many conversions. Anquash describes visiting a village when an earthquake occurred: "I told them, don't be afraid of the earthquake. It is Apajui you should fear. He is fearsome (*ishamainuk*). When I said this, everyone from Putjuk contracted themselves (to Apajui)." Wishu said,

> I lived in vain, killing people, getting drunk, fighting and talking in vain. Antonio announced the word of Apajui, that those not contracted to Apajui will not go to heaven (*nayaimpinmak*) but to the place of fire. And so I said, better that I contract myself to Apajui.

Chijiap provides a similar account and concludes, "Because I saw the danger, I followed Apajui." In the context of discovering herself to be a sinner, Ducitak told herself, "'Truly I am going to the place of fire.' Thinking of this I wept much." Chamik heard the word of Apajui but rejected it. Later, as he returned from participating in a homicide, he reports becoming overwhelmed with fear, "thinking what would happen to me if I did not deliver myself to Apajui." A year later, he did so. Anquash, a self-described womanizer and killer, reports having been warned, "If you don't leave your sin (*tudau*), you will suffer very much." The emergent sense of sin is, in part, an emergent fear of deserved punishment. Prior fears of retaliation by an enemy now become fear of punishment by an all-seeing and righteous God.

FORGIVENESS AND SALVATION

Dawai ends his lengthy narrative with a two-sentence summary: "Before I was a drunkard, a fighter (*manin*) and bad (*pegkegchau*). . . . Now I know what sin is, but I also know who Jesus Christ is." Esach, after months of inner turmoil over his spiritual state triggered by the death of a son, describes going to a pastor's house: "I wept when I spoke with him. He told me that it was for my sin that Jesus died. And so I confessed my life before Apajui." "Jesus is able to 'throw out' sin," Tiwi affirms. Anquash explains, "I asked Apajui to forgive me (*tsagkugtugta*), to erase (*esakatjugta*) my sin."

Conversion narratives maintain a clear focus on two alternatives, heaven (*nayainpinmak*) and hell (*jinum*). As sinners, people deserve hell. But for those who renounce sin, seek forgiveness based on the death of Jesus, and "contract themselves to" Apajui, there is forgiveness. Occasionally converts describe dreams that feature heaven. Wishu describes a dream in which he followed the "path of Apajui." Beautiful flowers, delicious fruit, and perfumed birds are encountered.

> I also saw the doves of Apajui. Their breast was the color of gold, and they sang beautifully. The houses which I saw from a distance were very beautiful. A being told me, "you are going to live here. Even though you will suffer, don't be disturbed. Your suffering on earth will be in vain." Telling me all, he showed me the things of heaven. Even now I do not forget the things Apajui showed me.

In other narratives, individuals describe "dying" and being denied admittance to a large house filled with followers of Apajui. Reviving, they "contract themselves" to Apajui.

THE GOOD PATH

Aguaruna conversion narratives construct a vision of two alternative ways of life. Puanchig says, "Dati preached the word of Apajui and the good path. He preached that a follower of Apajui should not slander. From there I became a true follower of Apajui." He was also influenced by a dream in which "I saw the dove of Apajui. It signaled me saying that this is the path of Apajui. And so I contracted myself (to Apajui). Having contracted myself, I felt good." Repeatedly one hears of dreams in which two paths are faced, and the journey language of following a path or of following Apajui is frequent. Repeatedly "the good path" and "good words" and "the word of Apajui" are linked. "Truly the word of Apajui is good" (Tiwi). "Now I live following good words" (Shimpu). "I heard good words about Apajui" (Cruz). "I also want the good path" (Tiwi). Perhaps the most common phrase describing conversion is simply, "I followed (*nemagkamiajai*) Apajui."

Preconversion lives are frequently presented as lives of personal disorder. "I drank much, sometimes well, sometimes badly. Many times I fought. Village leaders put me in jail. But this didn't stop me. I drank much, killed someone, and attacked others (verbally). Those who followed Apajui I criticized. I beat my wife, and injured her, so that her brothers beat me up" (Ujukam). Drinking, retaliatory violence, slander, and marital fights and breakups are typically featured as paradigmatic elements in a way of life subsequently renounced in conversion. Testimonies and preaching construct a model of the good life characterized by peace, forgiveness, love, sobriety, and fidelity. This good life is found by following Apajui and his word. For converts, it was not simply the condemnatory aspects of the religious message that motivated them, but also the alternative vision of a good life. "With the word of Apajui, we live in peace," says Chamik, a former killer.

This is a society with a high rate of female suicide. In Brown's (1984: 197) research, 58 percent of adult female deaths were due to suicide. And in my own case material, it is clear that a majority of these are directly related to the quality of marital relationships. The stories of suffering that women tell, frequently as a result of the men in their lives, are poignant. The path of Apajui provides new ideals. As Unug describes her conversion, following that of her husband, she tells how, at his initiative, they made a promise never to leave each other. "Very beautiful it is, to follow Apajui's path," she concludes.

Many communities initially responded in mass to the new vision of peace, stability, and love. Expectations, for some at least, were utopian. The break with manioc beer was not sustained by many. Gossip, resentments, and bad feelings did not fully disappear. Conversion narratives describe great struggles, on occasion, with sexual desire, desire for manioc beer, and the wish to retaliate against some offender. Many failed to maintain the new standards and either temporarily or permanently dropped out of church life.

"The good path" was not fully instantiated in the lives of converts. But this attractive image of the good is sustained in discourse, partially exemplified in the lives of converts, and provides the context for discourses about sin. The discovery of self as sinner is in part a result of an alternative vision of the good life, against which specific actions and patterns are discovered to be sinfully problematic. As converts heard the word of Apajui—a word about the good, not just about the bad—they discovered themselves to be sinners.

APAJUI AS COMPANION AND GUIDE

Although the theme of escape from punishment is one component of these narratives, a more central theme is that of entering into a personal relationship with Apajui. Entsakua reports:

> I contracted myself to Jesus. I came to know that Apajui loves us. I began to obey Apajui. Before I knew Apajui I could not travel alone. After I contracted myself to Jesus, when I traveled I felt as it there were two of us going together. Now, praying to Apajui, I travel at night to hunt, without fear.

Wishu describes a dream he had at conversion: "Apajui put fragrant medicine in my hair and bathed me. He said, I will never leave you. You are my son. Upon awakening, my body had a fragrant smell. And I prayed to Apajui with deep desire." Mamai says, "When I contracted myself, I felt very contented, light and good. I prayed all day to Apajui." Jempets describes his conversion: "I was very happy. With Apajui close by always, to talk to. And so I prayed to Apajui, asking what I should do. Every day I prayed." Again and again when narrators describe sufferings undergone, they stress the companionship of Apajui. Fifty-year-old Mamai describes her travails: "Although I suffered much, I never left Apajui. . . . Although I suffer, I am with Apajui. . . . When I get sick, no one cares for me . . . but I have Apajui. . . . I have suffered much. . . . But whatever the sorrow, it passes. In the new life there are other thoughts. We receive joy from Apajui." Again and again, Wishu intersperses accounts of his afflictions with comments like "Even if I walk alone, I am with Apajui" and "Although I suffer, I go on with Apajui. Apajui is always with me." Puanchig says,

> Having converted, I felt good. It seemed the spirit (*wakani*) lived in my heart, that it taught me and strengthened me. I went into the forest to pray. In this manner I lived, happy. And because I have tried it, I say it is good to pray. . . . It seems the spirit speaks in my heart, this way I feel what I should do, in my heart.

> "Don't do this, truly you cannot do this, those who work the work of Apajui do not go about doing transgressions!" And I fear. While others commit faults, and I have the thought of eating someone else's fruit—whether papaya or peanuts—Into my heart comes the thought that followers of Apajui do not eat the produce of others, and this idea enters my heart. And so it is true what they say, that when the spirit dwells in us, it teaches us.

SIN AS ONGOING REALITY

Narratives stress sins abandoned and removed at conversion: "All my sins I left with Apajui" (Shimpu). But in fact their narratives reflect ongoing struggle with sin. After mentioning his many preconversion sexual affairs, one man comments, "Because I have worked sin so much, I do not feel sure of not sinning, although I try." A traveling evangelist laments. "It is hard to preach without sinning. . . . With the strong bad desire for women I suffer. . . . Although I have bad thoughts, I do not act on them." Another says, "At that time I confronted the powerful desire in my heart pushing me to sexual (sin). But I decided to resist." Another's narrative includes this: "Then I lusted greatly for many women. When this happened I went into the mountain to pray to Apajui. (After fasting and prayer) I felt like a child, without sexual desire." The struggle with thirst for manioc beer, and ongoing struggles with anger and the desire to retaliate for offenses and insults, are likewise frequent themes.

This chapter focuses on sin in Christian conversion, not sin in postconversion life. However, it is worth noting that in these narratives "sin" is a concept continually brought to bear in all phases of the Christian's life. It is ongoing subjective experiences related to struggling with sin that add greatly to the grip that this concept has on the lives of Aguaruna converts. Many Aguaruna who initially converted and subsequently left the church did so under circumstances involving what was understood both by them and by others as the inability or unwillingness to overcome some temptation to sin. Indeed, I repeatedly encountered evidence that many such individuals believed themselves to be in a state of sin that they someday expected to repent of or that they found themselves unable to extricate themselves from. Pujupat, a former convert, describes having been slandered as a follower of Apajui, subsequently having an affair, leaving the church, adding another wife, and returning to drink. Worrying that he was "being lost for good," he decided to spend time praying to Apajui: "I wept and went into the forest alone. I said to myself, 'when I do this, I will feel good and joyful.' But I felt only empty. I noted that Apajui did not speak to me, and that I was completely abandoned. So I understood. From that time until now I have not been restored in my soul (*wakan*). Until now I am like this." In his narrative, he goes on to try and figure out what went wrong in his own life. But his reasoning continues to operate within the framework of Christian symbolism. That is, fully ten years after leaving the church, Pujupat is gripped by a set of symbols—a pivotal one being that of sin.

In conversion, people grasp and are grasped by a system of symbols that tells them about themselves and that contributes to the construction of new selves (Stromberg 1985). One such symbol in evangelical discourses is sin, a core element in what Hallowell (1976: 24) identifies as Christianity's "folk anthropology." Evangelistic narratives of sin draw on traditional vocabulary, speak to lived experiences of transgression and moral failure, construct alternative visions of the good, proclaim the existence of a morally concerned deity, reconfigure self-identity around a shared sinful condition that requires conversion, and encourage an active process of personal transformation in accord with the "word of God" and grounded in a personal relationship with God. Personal testimony is the preferred form of communication—fusing together the symbolic and the experiential. Narratives examined in this chapter fuse together personal experience and religious symbol in a way that provides personal coherence and models the route to a new self. Even when the new self remains unattained, the new symbols continue to exert influence and authority not easily ignored.

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