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Becoming a Woman or a Man: Subjective Theories among Shipibo-Konibo Adults and Youth

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Abstract: Gender relations and ideals among Amazonian indigenous peoples have changed significantly in modern times. We explored the subjective theories—understood here as self-perceptions and worldviews structured through hypothetical reasoning—about what it means to become a woman or a man within the Shipibo-Konibo community, the third largest Amazonian indigenous group in Peru. Drawing on in-depth interviews with urban young and adult Shipibo individuals, and analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, this study accounts for the complexities and shifting dynamics of gendered becoming among the Shipibo-Konibo. These processes are shaped by tensions between so-called "ancient" and "modern" ways of life, and between rural and urban experiences. While globalization and urbanization have brought both losses and valued new possibilities, Shipibo gender roles and cultural ideals remain significant, albeit with increased flexibility and a pragmatic outlook. The coexistence of indigenous and Western approaches, particularly in areas like contraception and STI treatment, reflects a dynamic culture that adapts and renews itself. These findings underscore the need for inclusive, community-driven policies that respect and integrate indigenous perspectives.
Keywords: Femininity and masculinity, gender, Shipibo-Konibo, subjective theories.

The Shipibo-Konibo, from the Pano linguistic family, is the third-largest indigenous group in the Amazon region of Peru (Ministerio de Cultura del Perú, 2024). They resulted from the merging of three Pano groups—the Shipibo, the Konibo, and the Shetebo—that settled along the Ucayali River, a tributary of the Amazon River (Eakin et al., 1980; Tournon, 2002). Ethnographic and psychological studies on the Shipibo have examined the normative conceptions, rituals, and processes involved in becoming a Shipibo-Konibo man or woman, as well as the changes that have taken place in recent times (Bertrand-Rousseau, 1986; Cárdenas, 2024; Espinosa, 2019, 2020; Holgado, 2024; Morin, 1998; Morin & Saladin D'Anglure, 2007; Ruiz, 2016; Sabroso, 2022). Traditionally, within a subsistence economy and its associated division of roles, men were valued for their hunting, fishing, and labor skills, while women were valued for qualities related to caregiving and knowledge of rao plants, which are essential for community belonging.

In nuclear and extended families, formal authority has traditionally been held by men, although women have also played an important role in the family and community (Cárdenas, 1989; Cladera, 2020; Eakin et al., 1980; Heise, Landeo & Bant, 1999; Kasih et al., 2021). For instance, unlike many other groups, the Shipibo-Konibo tradition allows women of fertile age to serve as shamans in certain settings (Belaunde, 2005; Colpron, 2006). Women are also

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primarily responsible for making geometric designs known as *kené* (Belaunde, 2012; Morin, 1998).

Extensive anthropological research has been undertaken on gender among the Amazonian peoples. Findings indicate that indigenous Amazonian cultures have parallel gender conceptions—with feminine gender acquired through the mother, and masculine through the father—as well as cross-gender conception, wherein men and women contribute jointly to the production of life through physical and social reproduction (Belaunde, 2018). However, the historical increase in exchanges with Western institutions and integration into the market economy has led to significant transformations in gender dynamics, resulting in the coexistence and entanglement of multiple gender systems with the parallel gender conception. Espinosa (2007) underscores how urbanization has contributed to Amazonian indigenous men often having to leave their communities to earn a living, thereby placing the burden of child-rearing and tending to vegetable gardens ("*chacra*") on women, who may also migrate to cities employed as domestic workers, sometimes "in situations that can practically be considered slavery" (p. 195). Among the Shipibo-Konibo, women in urban areas may generate income by creating and selling handicrafts, which has altered gender relations by positioning them as primary income earners within the household (Sabroso, 2022; Zavala & Bariola, 2007). This demonstrates how gender not only symbolizes differences but also structures power relations (Fuller, 2018, p.28).

Despite modern changes, the literature emphasizes the continued relevance of traditional ideals tied to Shipibo-Konibo identity. Espinosa (2012) suggests that community members can embody qualities such as *shinan* (thought, concentration), *onan* (wisdom, ability to see), and *koshi* (strength, courage), which are associated with shamanic characteristics. This is reflected in the title of the book by Agustina Varela, a renowned Shipibo-Konibo artisan: *Koshi Shinanya Ainbo*—a woman (*ainbo*) who is strong (*koshi*) and wise (*shinanya*) (Valenzuela & Varela, 2005). Espinosa (2012) argues that these ideals persist in contemporary forms, despite ongoing tensions with modern influences—a point also noted by Delgado (2016) from a psychoanalytic perspective.

From a psychological standpoint, few studies have analyzed Peru's Amazonian indigenous peoples, particularly the Shipibo-Konibo (Delgado, 2019, 2023; Delgado & Frisancho, 2021; Frisancho & Delgado, 2017, 2025; Frisancho et al., 2020, 2023; Holgado, 2024; Sabroso, 2022; Vega, 2014). Most of this research has emerged from moral psychology or psychoanalytic traditions. While these perspectives are valuable, they must be complemented by approaches that explore other dimensions of indigenous life, including gender and sexuality. This study, therefore, aimed to examine the subjective theories constructed by young Shipibo-Konibo community members about becoming men or women.

The notion of "becoming" captures our understanding of gendered subjectivity as non-essential, non-immanent, and socially constructed. We approach subjectivity in line with the post-structuralist turn in feminist theory, cultural theory, and critical discursive psychology. According to this framework, subjectivity is not an ontological fact but a process where discourses and affects converge to produce ways of being in the world within historically situated and socially constructed regulatory frameworks (Butler, 1990; Weatherall, 2012). Judith Butler's theory of performativity helps us understand gendered subjectivities as effects of discourse. What we come to recognize as "man" or "woman" becomes intelligible through the compulsive iteration of everyday acts within specific sociocultural contexts (Butler, 1990). Discourses are understood as "systems of power/knowledge" and "processes of meaning construction" that operate as scripts in daily life (Lozano Verduzco, 2022, p. 45). Through discourse, affects are rendered legible by being narrated and symbolized—although some subjective experiences may be inexpressible within existing systems of commensurability. Within this framework, subjectivity and gender are inseparable instances: becoming a subject

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is only possible through gender normativity. Subjectivity and gender materialized simultaneously, without reference to any prior essence, whether biological, symbolic, or spiritual (Butler, 1990). This approach advances an "external" psychological perspective, viewing affects, beliefs, or identities as social processes and practices mediated by language, rather than as individual or internal (Kanem & Norris, 2018; Niko et al., 2024; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Our concern, therefore, is not why individuals behave in certain ways but rather the social meanings through which they make sense of themselves and others.

The subjective theories (STs) framework provides an analytical lens rooted in psychology that aligns with our post-structuralist understanding of gendered subjectivity. STs are "cognitions regarding the phenomena of oneself and the world, which have a hypothetical argumentative structure that is at least partially explicit or explainable and which guide behavior" (Catalán, 2016, p. 55). Just as scientific theories help explain certain aspects of the world, individuals or groups create similar explanations through subjective and intersubjective processes rooted in specific social and cultural contexts. (Catalán, 2010, 2016). Notably, if they are based on a hypothetical argumentative structure (if X, then Y), STs guide behavior, as seen in this example: the behavior of ingesting a certain plant to prevent pregnancy is based on the following ST, "if I consume plant X, then I will not get pregnant."

In Peru, Amazonian indigenous peoples experience some of the highest levels of rights violations, as reflected in poor indicators for access to basic services such as sanitation, clean water, and internet; as well as high levels of anemia, malnutrition, limited healthcare, and poor educational outcomes (National Human Rights Coordinator, 2024; Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2023; Ramírez & Piroja, 2023). These challenges are compounded by the continuous dispossession of ancestral territories, exacerbated in recent decades by extractive policies and regulatory frameworks. In addition, indigenous communities face persistent threats from illegal activities, including drug and human trafficking, illegal logging and mining, and land grabbing (Espinosa, 2022; National Human Rights Coordinator, 2024; Pérez, 2020). Gender, in this context, is not just an ascribed identity or a standalone axis of oppression, but a field of productive relations that shapes the discursive and material conditions that render some indigenous lives unlivable (Canessa, 2012; Weismantel, 2001). Therefore, identifying and analyzing the STs about gendered becoming among the Shipibo is not only of theoretical significance, but also essential for informing culturally relevant policies, development programs, and interventions that better respond to the intersectional challenges affecting indigenous lives.

Moreover, given that much of psychology has developed many of its core concepts primarily based on the study of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations (Heine, 2020; Henrich et al. 2010), we argue that studying indigenoues STs offers a critical entry point for avoiding distorted understandings caused by the uncritical projection of researchers' and policymakers' own cultural assumptions as universal. Instead, this research contributes to generating situated knowledge in collaboration with indigenous peoples, promotes a more critical psychological discipline, and fosters interdisciplinary dialogue with gender studies, anthropology, ethics, and cultural studies.

Methodology

Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach to generate knowledge from the subjective experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013), understanding these experiences as contextual, historical, and situated (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Haraway, 1988). Likewise, the

methodology is rooted in a constructivist paradigm that understands subjectivity as a socially mediated process (Ratner et al., 2020).

Participants

A total of 20 young and adult men and women, who self-identified as Amazonian indigenous people belonging to the Shipibo-Konibo community and residing in the cities of Pucallpa and Lima, Peru, participated in this study. A substantial portion of the Shipibo people reside in Pucallpa, encompassing a large part of their ancestral territory. In Lima, the community of Cantagallo constitutes an important and emblematic indigenous settlement in the city. Individuals aged 15–24 years were considered "young people," while those aged 25–59 years were considered "adults" (United Nations [UN], 2004). However, it is important to emphasize that these stages are not rigid constructs but rather referential categories that reflect sociocultural contexts. For example, in environments with high levels of poverty, people often assume reproductive and labor roles at earlier stages in life (Dulcey & Uribe, 2002).

Participants were recruited using a non-probability sampling method, with the assistance of an indigenous leader who was responsible for contacting potential participants and conducting the initial approach and informed consent process.

Table 1

Demographic information of the participants

Name	Age	Gender	Birth place	Education level	Place of residence	Occupation	Marital status	Children
Emerson	45	M	Tupac Amaru native community	Complete Secondary school	Lima	Dressmaking	Co-habitant/ married	8
Kushi	18	W	Community of Cantagallo	Complete Secondary school	Cantagallo	-	Single	-
Metsa Same	48	W	Yarinacocha	Complete Secondary school	Yarinacocha - Benajema	Teacher	Co-habitant/ married	5
Wexarono	30	M	Yarinacocha - San Francisco	Higher	Yarinacocha - Benajema	-	Married	2
Ranin Jisma	30	M	Vista Alegre of Pashitea	Complete Secondary school	Yarinacocha - Benajema	Tec. Mechanical	Co-habitant/ married	3
Xeta Sani	33	M	Callería	Higher	Pucallpa	Various occupations	Single	2
Geter	29	M	Yarinacocha - San Francisco	Higher	Yarinacocha - Palmeras	Police officer	Married	1
Keneiwie	26	M	Yarinacocha - Santa Clara	Higher	Yarinacocha	Working on thesis	Single	0
Soy Wesna	38	W	Pahoyan	Higher	Yarinacocha - Benajema	-	-	5
Chonon Same	34	W	Yarinacocha	Higher	Yarinacocha - Achomego	Student	Single	3

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Inin Kena	30	W	Yarinacocha	Higher	Yarinacocha - Benajema	Teacher	Married	2
Mean Rona	29	W	Yarinacocha	Higher	Yarinacocha	Teacher	Legally married	2
Soimea	45	W	Yarinacocha	Higher	Yarinacocha - Palmeras	Teacher	Married	5
Pesin Kate	37	W	Marquez - Loreto	Higher	Yarinacocha - Perla	Housewife	Married	3
Kesten Soy	41	M	Aparía	Complete Secondary school	Yarinacocha - Benajema	Recruitment	Married	1
Sanken Bima	22	M	Callería	Complete Secondary school	Yarinacocha	Student/choco tejas (chocolate candy) business	Single	0
Reschi Jisbe	46	W	Pahoyan	Higher	Yarinacocha - La Perla	Teacher	Married	3
Wilder Barbarán	38	M	Ahuaypa	Higher	Yarinacocha - Perla	Assistant cook	Married	3
Biri Tsoma	54	M	Nueva Betania	Higher	Yarinacocha	Teacher	Widower	3
Metsa Rama	42	W	Pahoyan	Higher	Yarinacocha - Benajema	Library	Married	2

Procedure

We conducted in-depth interviews, understood as dialogical encounters through which the interviewer and interviewee co-construct situated knowledge (Lucas, 2014). Interviews also allowed us to build a trustworthy environment, motivating participants to discuss personal topics such as their ideas regarding gender relations and sexuality (Milena et al., 2008).

We developed a sociodemographic questionnaire and an interview guide with broad topics to guide the dialogue. Previous findings from Amazonian anthropology and concepts regarding gender and sexuality informed the construction of the interview guide. It included topics such as gendered expectations during pregnancy, gender assignment processes, ideas and experiences about parenting and gender socialization, inter-gender relationships, and sexual and gender diversity. We tested the quality and relevance of the guide through two pilot interviews conducted with Shipibo-Konibo individuals living in the Cantagallo community in Lima.

Fieldwork was conducted in the cities of Pucallpa and Lima by the four researchers. In addition to the collaboration of informants, we employed reflexivity to reduce power asymmetries inherent in the researcher-participant relationship (Speed, 2008). We position ourselves as scholars and educators at different stages of our academic careers, affiliated with a respected academic institution in the nation's capital. Despite our varied backgrounds, our current professional standing places us within the country's upper-middle class. Any apprehension stemming from being perceived as outsiders—or "nawa" in the Shipibo language—was mitigated through the support of an indigenous leader who served as our liaison, alongside one author's prior experience collaborating with the Shipibo community. Our research team showcased diversity in terms of age, gender, race, and sexual orientation, which

we strategically drew upon to build rapport with participants who shared similar sociodemographic characteristics.

Ethical Considerations

This study is part of a larger research project that was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Instituto de Investigación Científica (IDIC) at the Universidad de Lima. This overarching project involves further research with the same sample. Participants were invited to the study by an indigenous leader with whom the researchers had previously coordinated. This leader completed the first phase of informed consent by introducing the researchers, research objectives, and conditions of free and voluntary participation. The second phase of consent was presented by the researchers before each interview. Previous studies with Amazonian indigenous populations have underscored the importance and usefulness of this strategy (Frisancho et al., 2015). Participants expressed their desire for their Shipibo-Konibo name to appear in the research results.

Analytical Strategy

We used reflexive thematic analysis to identify and analyze patterns in the data, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) and adopting a constructivist and critical paradigm (Madill et al., 2000). Our approach combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis to address the research objectives and questions. Due to the involvement of four researchers, we introduced some modifications to the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). After transcribing the interviews, meetings were held to share each researcher's impressions of the data. This allowed us to become familiar with the information provided by participants regarding their STs. Based on this, each researcher independently coded two interviews. By reading line by line, they identified common words, phrases, expressions, and patterns, which they labeled using descriptive, in vivo, emotional, process, evaluation, and other codes (Fernández, 2018). This coding process was primarily based on an inductive approach drawn from the data. Subsequently, meetings were held to contrast and integrate these lists, producing a unified list of codes.

Using this list, the four researchers simultaneously coded the same interview, aiming to compare the use of codes and develop a tool for thematic analysis. Theoretical concepts from the literature on gender and sexuality studies, STs, and Amazonian anthropology were used to generate deductive codes. Subsequently, the entire dataset was coded using qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti 9 by one of the researchers using the code list. We held meetings throughout this process to refine the coding instrument. Upon completion of coding, codes were grouped around themes, which represented relevant and multifaceted patterns observed in groups of codes with common meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). The themes were discussed and compared until an analytical narrative was constructed, defining the four categories that group our results, as discussed below.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the main STs identified within the four established themes. In this table, we have synthesized and formalized participants' statements in terms of the conditional structure of STs (if X, then Y). Following this, we discuss each of the STs in detail, illustrating them in some cases with examples shared by the participants. As the participants use a regional variety of Spanish, we have made minor edits to their quotations for clarity (for example, for grammatical agreement) without altering their content or meaning.

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Table 2

Subjective Theories about Becoming a Woman/Man in the Shipibo-Konibo Community

Themes	Subjective theories
Desiring Gender, Managing Conception	If a girl/boy is born, she/he will assist by fulfilling the roles of her/his gender.
	If you want to prevent pregnancy, you can use plants and Western methods.
	Only if you diet will the plant be effective.
	If the mother's body has X shape, then it will be a boy or a girl.
Becoming Adult Shipibo Men and Women	If she has her first menstruation, then she is no longer a girl.
	If you develop the expected qualities for your gender, then you become a recognized adult in the community.
Intimate Relationships, then and now	~~If you develop the expected qualities for your gender role, then you are an attractive person.~~
	If you develop the expected qualities for your gender role, then you are a candidate for a union.
	If parents arranged a union, then a relationship was established.
	If a woman and a man want a union, then they establish a relationship.
	If you develop the expected qualities for your gender role, then you are an attractive person.
	If you have a partner, then authority and responsibility must be shared.
	If a member of the couple cannot fulfill his/her responsibilities, then these must be assumed by the other member.
	If you are a man or a woman, then you have sexual desires.
	If there is infidelity, then it is neither a serious nor an indifferent matter.
	If you have an STI, then it can be treated by traditional and Western methods.
Managing Sexuality Across Generations	If you are a mother or father, then you must care for, control, and accompany your children's sexuality.
	If you are a parent, then it is your responsibility to talk about sexuality with your sons and daughters.

Desiring Gender, Managing conception

In the case of young and adult men, a preference was found for the firstborn child to be a boy. This is attributed to the subjective theory that male children will offer greater support in providing food, sustenance, and maintaining the household. In rural communities and in "times gone by," men were expected to perform tasks requiring greater physical strength, such as gathering firewood, fishing, and other activities related to the community's productive trades.

In terms of STs, this expectation can be represented as follows: if a boy is born, then he will help by fulfilling his roles.

For Shipibo-Konibo women, both young and adult, there is a preference for having a daughter first. This is mainly based on a similar and parallel ST to that of men: if a girl is born, then she will help by fulfilling her roles. Thus, it is expected that girls learn and get involved in activities such as making meals, taking care of younger siblings, and other tasks related to household maintenance. According to the participants, mothers and grandmothers play a fundamental role in shaping future generations of women, teaching them the skills and responsibilities necessary for taking care of the household and preserving cultural traditions.

> Women want them to be girls, and men want them to be boys. Because they mostly work in fishing… so that they can also teach their sons, or their sons can help them. And women also want that [to have a daughter], for them to be at home, because mostly they work with crafts. They want to have support. (Xeta Sani, man, 33 years old)

The responses of both men and women reflect a framework of parallel gender reproduction, consistent with previous findings (Ames, 2021; Valenzuela & Varela, 2005). Parents of the same sex as the child are primarily responsible for teaching and guiding the child in their journey of becoming a man or woman, according to the gender roles assigned within the family and community structure. This includes providing support for the gender-specific tasks of the parents. The emphasis on role fulfillment, a characteristic of collectivist cultures, is also significant (Kitayama & Salvador, 2024). However, new ways of life in the city and the influence of discourses on gender equality are transforming the gender roles of men and women, as will be discussed later.

In terms of conception control, young and adult participants believe that it is possible to manage conception using Western birth control methods and plants with the necessary power –*rao* plants, in the Shipibo-Konibo community's denomination. Thus, the identified ST can be formulated as: if you want to prevent pregnancy, you can use plants and Western methods. In this regard, two points are noteworthy. First, for both men and women participants, Western methods and those from their cultural traditions can coexist without being antithetical. Despite a long history of assimilationist interventions by the State, religious groups, and some cooperation agencies that did not recognize indigenous cultural traditions and instead advocated for their abandonment, the STs of our participants show a pragmatism that moves away from dichotomous perspectives. This is relevant for designing development policies and programs.

Second, we consider it important to highlight the validity and extent of methods based on participants' cultural traditions. Despite transformations owing to the spread of schooling, market expansion, religious missions, highway construction, technology diffusion, new productive structures, and abandonment of certain traditional practices and rituals, among other factors, Amazonian indigenous cultures are not disappearing. Instead, the validity of their relationship with plants (in this case, for contraceptive uses) demonstrates how "the Shipibo-Konibo culture resists" within new contexts and against new challenges (Delgado, 2016, p. 254). Participants believe that certain ingredients or specific substances (commonly herbs, roots, or other natural elements) can prevent pregnancy by inhibiting fertility, subject to the practice of "dieting." This involves restricting the intake of certain foods to ensure that contraception is effective. As Metsa Same, a 48-year-old Shipibo-Konibo woman explained: "When we take plants, we must follow a diet. Do not eat salt, or just a little. Also, do not eat oil. That's how it works." The corresponding ST is: only if you diet will the substance be effective. This ST has also been mentioned in the testimony of Agustina Valera: "If you take

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the *piripiri* <<ash>> [a variety of plant] but you don't diet, you won't avoid pregnancy because you haven't fasted properly" (Valenzuela & Varela, 2005, p. 71).[2]

Regarding the possibilities of predicting the gender of children, participants expressed STs related to the mother's body. For example, they mentioned that if the pregnant woman shows sunken eyes, low weight, or physical deterioration, or if the baby moves too much with a hard and pointed belly, then the child will be a boy. Likewise, they expressed that if the pregnant woman gains weight, has a better physical condition, the baby is quieter, and the belly is soft, it will be a girl.

> Earlier, there were no ultrasounds to listen to their sounds, all of that, right? And it was just by touch. You felt whether it would be a girl or a boy. And that was noticeable in their eyes. (...) When it's going to be a boy, it moves a lot in you, but in contrast, with a little girl, it doesn't. It's just like you gain weight; that's it. (Soy Wesna, woman, 38 years old)

The STs and associated practices presented up to this point already demonstrate a living culture that maintains beliefs and cultural traditions while incorporating and engaging with other traditions.

Becoming Adult Shipibo Men and Women

The Amazonian indigenous system has no recognized intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood (Espinosa as cited in Anderson, 2018, p.56). In this framework, the transition fundamentally involves a change of roles and responsibilities, not just a physical change (Mejia et al., 2021). This does not mean, of course, that physical changes and the rites associated with them do not or have not played an important role, such as in the case of menarche. For instance, the *Ani Xeati*, the main festival of the Shipibo-Konibo community, now extinct, included rites of female transition such as cutting bangs and clitoral ablation (Morin, 1998; Morin & Saladin D'Anglure, 2007; Ruiz, 2016).

Regarding menarche, according to our informants, both men and women, a first ST emerges: if she has her first menstruation, then she is no longer a girl.

> A biological fact immediately has a social consequence (...) When they have their first menstruation, girls are no longer girls (...), so they have their own *candela* [wood-fire stove] (…) to prepare their breakfast (...) Mom does her thing, but the daughter also has to do it. And at mealtime, we share. So, yes, she already has her own *candela* [wood-fire stove]; she already has her own pots. She already does her thing (...) Because she is no longer a girl, she no longer expects others to give things to her; she has to do it. She already has to prepare her own things. (Biri Tsoma, man, 54 years old)

As can be seen in the quoted text, menstruation is associated with assuming new responsibilities related to actively contributing to the collective, not waiting for "others to give." A high value is placed on the willingness to do work that benefits the collective. Something similar occurs for men in tasks such as knowing how to fish, hunt, farm, be a *mitayo* (work in community tasks), or, in more general terms, be a worker:

> In the logic of the Shipibo, it is not acceptable to be idle. It is not acceptable to be arrogant or idle because it is not useful for society.

[2] The same pragmatic approach was observed in participant's responses to how they manage and control sexually transmitted infections (STIs), allowing for the coexistence without antithesis of knowledge, practices, and treatments from both the Western world and the Shipibo-Konibo cultural tradition.

> Being idle implies, let's say, being lazy, being nothing. (Biri Tsoma, man, 54 years old)

Developing and putting into practice the expected gender-determined qualities allows individuals to be recognized in their community and assume the role of an adult who contributes to the collective. The ST can be formulated precisely in these terms: if you develop the expected qualities for your gender role, then you become a recognized adult in the community.

Certainly, new contexts transform the expected gender roles, and our participants are fully aware of this:

> Now, well, men, before, for example, men only had to work on the farm, they had to work on the crops, in fishing, all those things. And women had to just be at home, taking care of the children, preparing the food, cleaning, and all those things, right? But now times have changed, already, right? Both men and women can do the same [jobs]. (Ranin Jisma, man, 30 years old)

We will return to this point later in the discussion on gender equality.

Intimate Relationships, then and now

For the participants, a woman's attractiveness is primarily related to her personality and attitude. An attractive woman is characterized by being hardworking and diligent, with her dedication and effort in daily tasks being valued. Additionally, a Shipibo-Konibo woman who takes care of her appearance and adorns her body according to traditions is appreciated. At traditional parties and celebrations, those who wear well-made typical clothing stand out, highlighting traditional features such as black, straight, and long hair, bangs, painted faces, and jewelry made with local products. The corresponding ST can be formulated as follows: if she has developed the qualities expected in a woman, then she will be attractive.

> Hair was always important. Ah, the hair. The one with the longest hair was a perfect woman, you could say. Ah, her... Yes, hair... And more than anything, it had to be black. Black hair. Long, black hair was... It's striking. (Ranin Jisma, man, 30 years old)

Something similar occurs in the case of men. The care of their appearance is also valued, although it is associated more with the use of Western clothing (shirts, pants, and sneakers), except on festive occasions. According to this, Reschi Jisbe, a 46 -year-old Shipibo-Konibo woman, recounted: "An attractive man also dresses nicely, with his dress pants, with his dress shirt. And he no longer wears Kushma (...). At festivities, he wears his vest or his shirt with its design." (Reschi Jisbe, woman, 46 years old)

Being sociable, cheerful, and humble, and exhibiting strength through characteristics such as "tolerance when drinking alcohol" are valued personality traits. In terms of social aspects, being a hardworking and reliable provider is also considered an attractive attribute in men. Their ability to perform tasks and support the family is valued, reflecting their commitment and responsibility. Additionally, Shipibo-Konibo men who hold positions of authority within the community, such as being an *apu* or leader, are considered attractive and given special status and respect. Finally, having economic resources is another desirable aspect, as it relates to a man's ability to provide for and sustain their family.

> A man has to be good, I mean, in every sense, to fulfill his responsibilities, to bring food home. Above all, to be a responsible father in every way, to lack nothing, to have enough food, clothing, and education. (Emerson, man, 45 years old)

As for establishing relationships, in Shipibo-Konibo culture, arranged unions were a common practice. According to the participants in our study, if women and men mastered the

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necessary basic skills for their gender role, they became candidates for arranging a union. The STs regarding this, located in the "ancient times" that are not necessarily remote, can be formulated as follows: if you develop the expected qualities for your gender role, then you are a candidate for a union. Consequently, if parents arranged a union, then a relationship was established.

Agustina Valera's testimony indicates that older women were the ones who, upon finding a man with qualities, brought the young woman together with the man (Valenzuela & Varela, 2005). In our sample, we have not found that this practice is primarily associated with the woman's initiative:

> When I finished secondary school, my dad, my mom, and my two older brothers had gathered. I listened to them: "Our daughter has finished secondary school. We have to hand her over to a man." That's what my dad said. What! I was listening; they were going to find me a man, a stranger perhaps. Oh, how can they dare to do that? My brother agreed. "Otherwise, she will get pregnant, and we will be a shame," he said. And the other brother said, "No, we shouldn't do that. We should send her to study." That's what he said. My mom also disagreed. (Reschi Jisbe, woman, 46 years old)

This participant's testimony offers a glimpse of the tensions and complexities that can arise around the practice of arranged unions in the Shipibo-Konibo community, where cultural traditions, a critical perspective of them, and values such as education and the pursuit of autonomy intertwine. Cultures are dynamic, and individuals can always adopt a critical perspective of their traditions and cultural practices (Delgado & Frisancho, 2021; Turiel, 2012). As expressed by the study participants, a critical view of arranged unions does not mean that such a view is "less" characteristic of the Shipibo-Konibo culture, as if it were an inert relic destined to be "preserved."

> Earlier, there was no falling in love. Falling in love was something hidden, as my mom says. There was no dating, no falling in love. Everything was like, you grow up, and you already have your partner; you're arranged to meet. But now, I think there's more freedom. Now, young people make their own decisions. (Biri Tsoma, man, 54 years old)

In this line, one aspect that stands out in our study participants' responses is the widespread presence of the gender equality discourse. This is related to actions carried out by the State, non-governmental organizations, and international cooperation agencies. As Füller has pointed out, "Indigenous populations are embedded in multiple networks of local, regional, national, and global political relations that encourage women's participation and criticism of traditional gender relations" (2019, p.42). In the case of our study, this is particularly noticeable given their level of education and the profession they practice: 7 are educators, 13 have completed higher education, and 4 have completed secondary school. Thus, in various ways, our participants expressed that in the domestic sphere, women and men should have a voice and should be able to participate in important decisions affecting the family. A first ST is evident: authority and responsibility must be shared with your partner.

> I also cannot order, nor can he, right? Both my husband and I must talk, right? He's not going to say, "you know what, woman?" Well, he can't come to yell at me, nor can I at him. (Soimea, woman, 45 years old)

However, this does not imply an equal distribution of tasks and responsibilities. Still, according to participants, it is important to acknowledge the transformations in gender roles brought about by urban life and women's access to education. In the absence of one member of the couple, the other assumes the corresponding responsibilities. For instance, if the woman is

away for work-related reasons, the man takes on the household tasks necessary for the functioning of the home. Similarly, when the man is absent, the woman may take on physically demanding agricultural tasks or gather food. This dynamic reflects another subjective theory (ST): *if one member of the couple is unable to fulfill their responsibilities, then the other must assume them.*

This flexibility or pragmatism in the gendered division of labor reflects the complementary roles played by Shipibo-Konibo men and women in domestic tasks. While certain activities may still be perceived as "feminine" or "masculine," both genders are seen as essential contributors to the well-being of the household and the broader community. Within this framework, roles can be distributed with flexibility. The following quotation illustrates this in the context of market demand for fabrics featuring *kené* designs, which are primarily produced by women:

> When I had a partner, we complemented each other. I helped with cooking. Moreover, when she did her embroidery, she would say, "Come, come, I will teach you so you can help me, and we'll be faster." She [the wife] taught me. "Next week, a friend is coming, a foreigner. And she has orders for me. Help me," she says. In the evening, we were already weaving. (Biri Tsoma, man, 54 years old)

Of course, this does not imply an idyllic vision of complementarity or of contemporary gender relations within the Shipibo-Konibo community. While men are still regarded as the ultimate authority in certain contexts, women also recognize and exercise their agency.

Another aspect of couple relationships that emerged in participants' responses concerns infidelity. Although interviewees did not express indifference toward the issue, they acknowledged that it is often tolerated. According to them, economic considerations are a key factor in this attitude. Women may accept infidelity, valuing financial stability as a primary reason to maintain the union. Additionally, the decision to stay together is frequently influenced by the presence of children and the perceived importance of raising them within a unified household. Parental responsibility, emotional commitment to children, and the value placed on co-parenting led many couples to remain together despite instances of infidelity. Participants also noted that frequent work-related mobility between cities—resulting in long periods of physical separation—was perceived to increase the likelihood of infidelity.

Pesin Kate, a 37-year-old Shipibo-Konibo woman, told us: "The cousins see him [my husband], and they flirt with him. They're already taking him away. They're quick. That's how they are. That's why I've never left my husband behind." Echoing this theme from another angle, Wexarono, a 30-year-old Shipibo-Konibo man, remarked: "Perhaps women [are more unfaithful] because men sometimes... sometimes I hear that men don't satisfy them well, so they look for other people, other men, who satisfy them better."

As reflected in the participants' testimonies, a noteworthy aspect is that women are seen as agents of their own sexual desires, not merely as passive respondents to male desire. This aligns with ritual representations of infidelity within Shipibo-Konibo culture. In earlier times, during the Ani Xeati festival, one of the rituals involved public confrontations between women (*bachinanai*), driven by jealousy or cases of infidelity, where women would often pull each other's hair (Ruiz, 2016). Today, outside the context of Ani Xeati, such confrontations continue and are referred to as *chobeo*.

Managing Sexuality Across Generations

This theme captures a set of STs related to the issue of gendered sexuality. Particularly, we explore and critically interrogate how sexuality was discussed (or not discussed) during our participants' gendered socialization, and how this has changed over time. Participants have a

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first ST, located in the past, that can be formulated as follows: if it is a matter of sexuality, then it cannot be discussed in the family. As Reschi Jisbe, a 34-year-old Shipibo-Konibo woman told us: "Sexuality was never discussed. Our father didn't talk to us about sex. Neither did our dad nor our mom." According to the participants, this meant that individuals turned to sources external to the family unit, particularly their peers, to learn about sexuality. This finding is consistent with Delgado's (2016) study based on interviews and life stories.

Additionally, participants reported that discourses about sexuality were mainly presented from a control perspective that included inducing fear. For instance, Pesin Kate, a 37-year-old woman, recounted: "It just scared us. Oh, she said, oh, my mom was also a drama queen. Oh, 'don't go out, they'll rape you, you'll bleed.'"

In the case of women, Ames (2021) also reports a discourse of control and surveillance. From menarche onward, mothers warn their daughters that they must be careful around boys because they could get pregnant. However, in our sample, in addition to this discourse of control and surveillance, discussions infused with notions of care and parental involvement also appear. Both men and women recognize that, unlike in "ancient times," today, it is the responsibility of both fathers and mothers to talk about sexuality with their children, and in some cases, even beyond parallel gender conceptions. In this context, it is interesting to note that fathers also assumed the role of family members who talk about sexuality, even with daughters. Soy Wesna, a 38-year-old woman, told us: "Yes, my dad was the one who corrected me the most, talked to me, advised me. That's how my dad was…".

In this sense, although it has not been widespread, a ST about fatherhood that goes beyond common stereotypes about it—the father as provider, agent of discipline, or responsible for educating sons—can be formulated as follows: if you are a father, then it is your responsibility to talk about sexuality with your sons and daughters.

However, this reported transformation in the way Shipibo families speak (or do not speak) about sexuality says less about a shift from a repressive regime governing sex to a liberated attitude, and more about how participants themselves understand what "sexuality" means. In other words, rather than interpreting this change through a quantitative lens—*people used to speak less about sexuality; now they speak more*—we propose a qualitative approach that attends to the shifting meanings and practices our Shipibo participants associate with "speaking about sexuality." The ethnographic literature reports that, before extensive contact with Western society, indigenous Amazonian peoples managed sexuality through gendered rituals and practices such as dieting, reclusion, abstinence, and consumption of plants and animals with special properties (Belaunde, 2005; 2018; Gontijo, 2021). In the case of the Shipibo, the *Ani Xeati* was a significant rite associated with the formation of female sexuality, during which knowledge about reproduction, menstruation, and sex was transmitted intergenerationally (Ames, 2021). This evidence suggests that sex, reproduction, and the gendered body were issues that concerned indigenous communities of the past. However, they were not necessarily articulated and managed through the modern discourse of sexuality, which is, in the strict sense, a modern invention of European origin (Foucault, 1976/2023).

Thus, when our participants say that in ancient times "sexuality was never discussed," this does not imply that sex and the body were irrelevant categories in Shipibo society, but rather that they were not articulated through the *dispositif* of sexuality. Today, Shipibo mothers and fathers remain concerned with their children's sexualities—understood as something they *"have"*—but instead of managing them through rituals such as reclusion and abstinence, they draw on the language and practices of pedagogy and sexual education. We therefore distinguish between two modes of managing and producing sexed bodies: one grounded in gendered ritual practices, and the other in the modern discourse of sexuality. While elements of traditional knowledge persist or are rearticulated in new ways, the latter—modern pedagogical and biomedical discourses—appear to be more prevalent today.

Conclusions

Through the identified STs, we have explored the complexities and transformations in the processes of gendered becoming among the Shipibo-Konibo people. These transformations are consistently framed by participants through contrasts between "ancient" and "current" times, and between "there" (rural communities) and "here" (urban settings). As previously noted, the increasing integration of indigenous communities like the Shipibo-Konibo into global capitalism has produced a range of transformations in their productive structures and material and symbolic needs, their cultural identities, and—most relevant to this study—their processes of gendered subjectivation (Delgado, 2023; Espinosa, 2007; Santos-Granero, 2021; Zavala & Bariola, 2007).

However, participants' references to "ancient times" or rural communities do not simply reflect an idealized vision of a premodern past. On the contrary, their discourse reveals a nuanced perspective: while the present is perceived as entailing certain losses (e.g., the disappearance of traditional male clothing), it is also valued for the new possibilities it brings, such as the formation of couples based on romantic love. Despite these changes, adherence to cultural ideals associated with traditional gender roles remains meaningful. For example, qualities traditionally seen as desirable in a man or a woman within Shipibo communities still carry weight, though there is now greater flexibility due to shifting labor and production contexts.

Overall, our study points to a living culture that both sustains and renews its subjective theories about what it means to be a Shipibo-Konibo man or woman. One clear example is the pragmatic coexistence of traditional and Western approaches to contraception and STI treatment. We see this as a valuable resource for the design and implementation of policies, programs, and projects that, rather than taking an assimilationist approach, aim to improve the realization of rights for the Shipibo-Konibo people. This requires the active participation of indigenous community members in the development and execution of initiatives that directly affect their lives (Espinosa, 2022).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, all participants reside in urban areas, and their experiences may differ significantly from those living in rural settings with distinct social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Second, the study focused on STs about becoming a man or a woman from a predominantly heterosexual perspective. However, not all members of the Shipibo-Konibo community identify within this framework. Third, although we included participants ranging in age from 18 to 54, future research should consider both older and younger individuals to gain a fuller picture. Future studies should further explore the diversity of STs within the Shipibo-Konibo population, taking into account intersecting factors such as age, geographic context (urban vs. rural), sexual orientation and gender identity, and socioeconomic status. Such an approach would offer a more comprehensive understanding of gendered becoming in Shipibo-Konibo culture.

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