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## Shuar Mythology in the Postcolonial Perspective on the Basis of the *Etsa* Picturebook

Mitologia Shuar w perspektywie postkolonialnej  
na przykładzie książki *Etsa*

### KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

Shuar mythology,  
postcolonialism,  
picture book,  
indigenous myths,  
Amazon Basin,  
Ecuador

Myths presented in the form of picture books can spark an interest in the culture they originate from. They also have an important educational role and can be an effective medium for sharing indigenous perspectives. In this article I analyse and interpret the picture book titled *Etsa*. Its main theme is based on one of the most important myths of the Shuar people – an indigenous group of Ecuador. The book could be adopted in the curriculum in elementary school in order to expose young students to cultural diversity and practices that are specific to the Shuar culture. Postcolonial and perspectivist lenses are used to show that in this book – similarly to many others – indigenous myths that are originally full of meaning are transformed into simple stories that do not convey important local values. One of the most important Shuar myths about the Sun personification became a story about the boy who recklessly follows a demon. The book that was to present a Shuar myth probably should not be used in classroom as fails to fulfil its promise.

## SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

mitologia Shuar,  
książka obrazkowa,  
mity rdzennych  
grup, Dolina  
Amazonki, Ekwador

Mity prezentowane w formie książki obrazkowej mogą wzbudzić zainteresowanie kulturą, z której pochodzą. Odgrywają również ważną rolę edukacyjną w zapoznawaniu dzieci i młodzieży z perspektywą rdzennych mieszkańców globu. Niniejszy artykuł zajmuje się analizą i interpretacją książki obrazkowej zatytułowanej *Etsa*, która bazuje na jednym z najważniejszych mitów Shuar – rdzennej grupy z Ekwadoru. Tego typu książka mogłaby być włączona do programu szkoły podstawowej, ponieważ zapoznawałaby uczniów w różnorodnością kulturową i praktykami kulturowymi charakterystycznymi dla grupy Shuar. Postkolonialna i perpektywistyczna analiza pokazuje jednak, że w tej pozycji – tak samo jak w wielu innych – rdzenne mity pełne znaczeń są przekształcone w proste opowiadania nieprzenoszące ważnych wartości kulturowych. Jeden z najważniejszych mitów Shuar o personifikacji Słońca stał się tu historią o chłopcu, który bezwolnie podąży za demonem i nie rozumie rzeczywistości, w jakiej się znalazł. Książka określana jako prezentująca mit Shuar nie powinna być wykorzystywana w nauce szkolonej, ponieważ nie spełnia obietnicy założonej już w tytule.

## Introduction

A picturebook is present in many cultures today, as it is an excellent tool for passing on knowledge, for overcoming fears or prejudices, or for teaching everyday behaviour. In recent decades, picturebooks have also been published in the area of the Amazon, and I am particularly interested in those containing knowledge of the native people of this region. My considerations will be based on a book depicting a myth of the Shuar group from Ecuador. This is for several reasons: first, the Shuar group stands out from other groups in the region for its strong sense of cultural identity; second, the use of myth in a picturebook allows for cultural and postcolonial interpretation. And finally, the book has been published on an online YouTube channel as still images with text read by a narrator (Andarele Casa Editorial, 2018b), so the item has the potential to reach a wider audience and thus might be an educational aid to use with children when teaching cultural diversity. This could apply to children in a Spanish-speaking school, as well as to children in schools teaching Spanish as a second language (regardless of the country in which this takes place).

The aim of the analysis and interpretation undertaken is to show the origins of the myth under study, its significance for Shuar culture, and the transformations it has undergone in the process of “making it accessible” to a wider audience, including to a young reader. First of all, I have used a text study, but I have supplemented this

with a perspectivist reflection, which made it possible for me to look at the myth from a different point of view and to identify its role for the Shuar people. The postcolonial perspective, in turn, made it possible for me to place the book under discussion and the myth it contains in a broader historical and cultural context.

## The post-colonial perspective

In 2012, Ewa Majewska wrote about the postcolonial perspective that it has become a “real plague” in Poland as it is widely present in scientific, literary and social discourse (Majewska, 2012, p. 335). However, as a historically and politically entangled current, stemming from colonisation and decolonisation, it raises numerous questions and takes different forms depending on who is using it. I do not want to present the history of colonialism and postcolonialism here, as they have been extensively discussed in numerous sources (e. g. Gandhi, 2008; Hiddlestone, 2009; Young, 2012; Poniak, 2013; Mazurczak, 2016) and they do not directly belong to the subject matter I have addressed here. Among the numerous definitions, the one closest to me is the one put forward by Robert Young who defines postcolonialism as “a change in the dominant ways of seeing the relationship between Westerners and non-Westerners, and the relationship between their worlds” (Young 2012, p. 15). The way to achieve this (elusive) goal, according to the author, should be to develop theoretical structures that would enable a different perception of the world than the “Western one”. It is difficult to imagine what these theoretical structures would be like, since simply looking at different perceptions of the world is a challenge fraught with great cognitive error. The only way out is probably to look at representations of the world presented by non-Western representatives. Young also emphasises the “invisibility” of what is outside the Eurocentric way of thinking, and considers it most important to bring minority knowledge into the mainstream (Young, 2012, p. 20). And this is one of the aims of the postcolonial perspective: to give voice to those who have previously been silenced or ignored.

In the case of Latin America, however, postcolonialism raises questions of a different kind: since it was developed in the twentieth century as a tool of analysis for understanding British colonisation mainly in India and Africa, it perhaps makes no sense to apply it to the issue of the much earlier colonisation of South and Central America (Klorde Alva, 1995, p. 264)<sup>1</sup>. As Lesley Wylie writes, the argument over postcolonial analysis has gone so far that he even started to call it a new form of colonisation: again,

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1 It should be remembered that the postcolonial perspective was developed after the withdrawal of the European powers from Africa after the Second World War, while Europe almost completely withdrew from Latin America at the end of the 19th century.

local contexts were to be explained using foreign models (Wylie, 2009, p. 5). However, since the essence of postcolonialism lies not only in chronology, but also in the labelling of the experience with certain contexts, it is also possible to apply it to Latin America. In his essay *Including America*, Peter Hulme calls for a use of the postcolonial perspective that encompasses every colonial experience, regardless of its chronology (Hulme, 1995, p. 123).

## Mythologies of the Amazon

The Amazon area occupies such a vast space<sup>2</sup> and is so culturally rich that entire volumes have been devoted to describing the literature produced by its inhabitants (cf. Vázquez, 1978; Orjuela, 1986; Sá, 2004; Suárez-Araúz, 2004; Landeo et al, 2006, Pereira, 2007; Relucé, 2018). Despite this, this work remains largely unknown to the wider public, which is further evidence of the “invisibility” of those who have been subjugated (formerly politically, today mainly socially and economically). This situation is slowly changing, but this is only marginally the case for indigenous peoples who, even in independent countries, still have a subordinated position, usually both economically and socially. An important part of the work of these groups is mythology which is a treasure chest of knowledge about indigenous traditions, but which is also changing: some “myths” date from recent decades, providing evidence of the updating of stories to fit contemporary needs. However, the primary role of Amazonian myths is to link history and the present (Whitten & Whitten, 1993, p. 337), to make sense of the times in which we live. Texts of indigenous groups based on myths always face the fundamental problem of translating the oral into the written: technology changes the structure of expression, making it difficult to convey contents (Relucé, 2018, p. 248). Myths passed down through generations change over time, and when they are written down, they are fixed in a specific version. The form is also disturbed: what is used in the oral story is often no longer applicable in the written record. Numerous repetitions, mnemonic techniques or rhythm are lost, and they may have carried additional meanings in the oral story. Nevertheless, writing down local myths in a more or less literary form is an important part of the development of literature, as well as an expression of attachment to tradition.

Amazonian myths vary from group to group: they are the result of indigenous people’s relationships with the land, with the forest, with other people and with other beings (Montalvo, 2007, p. 49), but, as with all myths, they depict the behaviours required in a given group and indicate those that are not desirable (Eliade, 1970,

<sup>2</sup> The Amazon Valley has about 7 million km<sup>2</sup>, which is roughly the size of Australia.

p. 345). In this text, I will focus only on Shuar culture and mythology, as the myth contained in the picturebook under discussion originates from this culture.

## Shuar Culture and Mythology

The indigenous Shuar group includes approximately 40,000–100,000 people (Wray et al., 2003) living in south-eastern Ecuador and speaking the Shuarchicham language. In the times before contact with Western culture, the Shuar people lived in villages scattered over a large area, but after increased missionary activity (mainly by the Salesians) in the 1930s, larger settlements were established, which led to changes in the social structure (Paymal & Sosa, 1993, p. 187). Today, the Shuar economy is based mainly on hunting, gardening and fishing, and, to a lesser degree, on farming and cattle breeding.

Contact with Western culture, as with other groups, led to many changes. The activity of colonisers and settlers resulted in the reduction of the population, the loss of land and disappearance of traditions. However, in 1964 the Federation de Centros Shuar (Federation of Shuar Centres, FCS; Bodley, 2008, p. 198) was founded. The Shuar saw the threat of losing not only their lands but also their cultural identity. Securing land ownership was crucial for them, but later the Federation also started to deal with education (previously the missionaries managed boarding schools, and the Federation provided bilingual education and education by local teachers). The Federation's activities are unique compared to the Amazon as a whole; they allow for the preservation of the identity of culture members, as well as the control of their future (Bodley, 2008, p. 199). The Federation's social activities have also been extended to the political ones, as, for years, it has belonged to the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon, CONFENIAE), which brings together – as the name suggests – all indigenous groups of the region. Thus, the Shuar representatives actively participate in the social and political life of Ecuador.

An important medium used in intercultural education, shaping, among other things, attitudes towards Others and their cultural identity, is literature. In the case of the Shuar, the start of writing (in any form) is clearly linked to spreading the Gospel. The missionaries emphasised learning about the indigenous culture and language (usually with the aim of converting its members to the Christian religion), which was then helpful in translating the Bible into the local language. The missionaries needed Shuar people who could write and read, as this facilitated the transmission of the new religion. The Shuar themselves began to write down their myths and legends in the second half of the twentieth century with the start of bilingual education for children

(Buitron & Deshoulliere, 2019, p. 178), and later they also started to create literature in a broader sense. In my reflections, I deal with myths which primarily carry a message of traditional values and have an impact on the maintenance of culture. On the other hand, it is important to remember that the preservation of myths in written form is also a form of their petrification, simplification and standardization. The book I am discussing will be an example of this.

Shuar mythology has been presented in numerous publications (e. g.: Barrueco, 1985; Rueda, 1987; Pellizzaro, 2005; Ipiak, 2021) because, as I mentioned earlier, they have served as a tool to preserve cultural identity and are used in Shuar schools (Deshoulliere & Buitron, 2019, p. 195).

Shuar myths follow a traditional way of life. Therefore, they are linked to the rainforest, to flora and fauna, to water and to the earth which is connected with the moon and the sun. The mythology conveys the material and spiritual relationships relevant to Shuar culture, based on three worlds: 1) the earth (*nunka* in shuarchicham) inhabited by Shakaim, the lord of the forest (*ikiam*); 2) the sky (*nuyaimp*) with Etsa, the sun and the lord of energy, and Ayumpum, the lord of life and death; accompanied by Yaas (stars), Nantu (moon) and Atsut (mythical women); and 3) water, where dwells Nunkui, the lady of all abundance on earth, and Tsunki, the lord of water, and Arutam, the giver of powers and visions which are very important elements of Shuar culture (Ipiak, 2021, p. 3). As Ampam Karakras Ipiak writes, in mythological times plants, animals and forest birds had the ability to transform themselves into humans, birds and plants as needed (Ipiak, 2021, p. 3), hence transformation and interdependence between all beings is an important element in the myths. From this comes the nature of mythic events: the main theme includes interactions between the inhabitants of the three worlds, resulting in the behaviours and values present in the Shuar culture. The Shuar believe, similar to the Achuar and Aguaruna groups, that they have been shaped by heroes in mythic times (Rubenstein, 2012, p. 58), and myths reflect this belief by recounting events related to cosmogony. The myths are also a source of knowledge concerning the Shuar's relationship with nature in all its manifestations and the interdependence between all beings (Rubenstein, 2002, p. 147).

## Etsa in Mythology and in the Picturebook

One of the main figures of Shuar mythology is Etsa who is the lord of everything on earth. His manifestation is the sun, but he can also take the form of any diurnal animal (<https://pueblosoriginarios.com>). Etsa taught the Shuar how to hunt, as well as everything related to survival in the rainforest. Interestingly, in some myths, Etsa is a man who only later becomes something more, i. e. the lord of the land. The man

was different than other Shuar people as he was very strong, wise and dedicated to his people. That is why, he saved them from Iwia, an evil, man-eating demon. The legend of Etsa and Iwia is given in various versions, and the most popular one tells the story of a boy who, as an infant, enchanted Iwia so much that the demon let him live and raised him as his son. Every day Etsa had to hunt birds which Iwia ate: in this way, the demon did not hunt for humans. One day the boy realised that there were no more birds to hunt; all of them had already been eaten by the demon and the forest fell silent. Suddenly, a pigeon flew up to him and asked if Etsa would kill him too. Etsa denied it and was very happy to see the bird. They became friends and then the pigeon revealed the truth to the boy: Iwia had killed Etsa's parents and was using him to bring himself food. The bird provided the boy with another valuable piece of information: Etsa can restore the balance in the forest if he collects feathers from all the birds he had previously killed, puts them in his blowpipe, and blows. The boy was very happy about this opportunity: he collected the feathers, placed them in his blowpipe, and when he blew into it, the colourful feathers flew out and turned into birds. The forest was once again full of life and chirping. Etsa refused to cooperate further with Iwia, and, from then on, they became mortal enemies. In subsequent myths, Etsa defeated Iwia and killed him, thus avenging the deaths of his mother and father.

Another version of the Etsa and Iwia myth tells a slightly more complex story: Iwia demons attacked Shuar villages and devoured people. The Shuar had no chance of winning, although they tried to fight back. Then Etsa, a Shuar known for his skill and strength, came to the rescue. Etsa went to the demons and negotiated a deal with them: every day he would hunt wild animals in the forest and bring them to the Iwia, and the Iwia would not attack people. When he returned to the village, Etsa explained to the people that he would teach them different hunting techniques, that they would work together in the forest to set traps for the demons and, in time, kill them all. When this happened, Etsa returned to his settlement and, blowing into his blowpipe, recreated the game he had killed to feed the demons. Eventually, Etsa concluded that his role on earth was over and he made another transformation, turning into the sun (Perkins and Chumpi, 2001).

One can also find versions of the Etsa myth that unfold the story of the boy's life in the house of the demon: the latter tricks Etsa by pretending to be the voice of his mother and thus reassuring Etsa that his mother is alive; Iwia's wife also appears in some versions (cf. Barrueco, 1985, p. 40; Ipiak, 2021, p. 32)<sup>3</sup>.

Regardless of the version of the Etsa myth, the Shuar see this figure as the prototype of a perfect Shuar who is an excellent hunter and cares about justice (Ipiak,

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3 In his book, Marco Vivicio Rueda distinguished 13 versions of the Etsa myth, including five published versions (1987, p. 30).

2021, p. 33). This is a very important figure for Shuar culture because he represents everything necessary for survival: the forest, animals, hunting techniques and handi-crafts, in addition to the values necessary to be a member of Shuar culture.

Myths are interesting stories to present in a children's picturebook, and the myth of Etsa contains elements that make the story particularly interesting for a young reader: vividly described characters (the demon Iwia and the obedient Etsa), dramatic events (the devouring of humans by the demon; the death of Etsa's parents; the boy's upbringing by the demon; the extinction of birds, etc.), the loss and recovery of identity (Etsa as an unaware boy who later learns he is not the son of a demon but of humans), the miraculous rescue of the forest (the recreation of the population of birds), and the main character's escape from the evil demon's power, as well as the lessons learned from these events.

The picturebook on the basis of which I would like to analyse this legend was published in Ecuador, in Spanish, by Casa Editorial Andarele in 2018, as an e-book (Andarele Casa Editorial, 2018a) also available on the YouTube channel (Andarele Casa Editorial, 2018b). The illustrations were made by Gabriel Chancay, and they use some Shuar cultural elements (face-painted patterns or a crown of feathers). The style is designed to be appealing to the young viewer of the book: most of the illustrations are very colourful (the exception to this is the scene of the main character's sadness, when maroon and orange dominate, and the scene of receiving bad news – here the colours are blue, turquoise and green), and the way of drawing is unambiguous and literal, so it does not leave much room for imagination. The style of the illustrations is definitely different from what can be seen in the Shuar myths which are treated as serious stories, but this is understandable in a work aimed at children.

The book presents the most popular version of the Etsa myth, in which a boy is raised by the demon Iwia to hunt birds for him. Later in the story, all the birds die except for one pigeon, Yápankama<sup>4</sup> who befriends Etsa and reveals to him the truth about the death of his parents, and who advises him what can be done to bring the birds back to the forest. The most characteristic part of the Etsa story, i. e. the scene of turning feathers into birds using a blowpipe, is, as always, very colourful and dynamic. This is the most frequently depicted motif of this myth and of the main character in general: the feathers going out of the blowpipe held by Etsa turn into colourful birds in flight and fill the whole forest.

However, the story presented in the picturebook is very simplified compared to the original Shuar myth. First and foremost, in the picturebook Etsa is an ordinary boy kidnapped by a demon and making his wishes come true. From the beginning to the end of the book, Etsa is rather passive and easily manipulated: if it wasn't for the

<sup>4</sup> *Yápankam* is the local name for the mountain pigeon (*Columbarupestriis*).



rescued pigeon Etsa encountered, he wouldn't have been able to cope with the situation he found himself in. Yes, he was sad that there were no birds (or more precisely: that he had killed all the birds), but it was only Yápankam who made him realise the truth about Iwia and gave him a way to bring the birds back to the forest. Also, in the book we do not deal with any consequences of the boy's actions, and, at the end, there is only the information that he never again hunted to give food to Iwia. And yet, Etsa is the central figure of Shuar mythology; the personification of the sun, power and all the skills needed for life. He is the main teacher of the Shuar; the one who saved them from the evil powers of the demons, and who ultimately killed Iwia (Mader, 1999, p. 81).

In a perspectivist interpretation, the Etsa myth would appear in very different contexts. Perspectivism attempts to explain the indigenous understanding of the world that defines Amazonian cultures (cf. Fausto, 2007) and assumes that indigenous peoples perceive plants and animals as internal to, rather than external to, the human condition (Uzendoski, 2012, p. 58), because social reality is not limited to humans alone, but also includes all *non-human* beings (apart from plants and animals, also rivers, landscape or wind, and celestial bodies). The difference among beings is expressed in the perspectivist change of the bodily form. Added to this is the idea of transformation, as animal bodies have been transformed and hide their life essence (Uzendoski, 2012, p. 59), which is the same essence as the human essence. Thus, all beings are interconnected, even if we do not notice these connections at first glance.

In the picturebook under analysis, however, these relationships are not apparent. Etsa is an orphaned boy who provides food for the demon; Etsa does not ask any questions, and he does not try to fight with the situation. When Yápankam tells him about the possibility of recreating the population of birds, the only element of transformation appears in the story: feathers turn into birds. However, this only results in the fact that the boy stops hunting to feed Iwia, and for some reason unexplained in the text, the demon accepts this. This is quite strange, taking into account the fact that Iwia is a man-eating monster that Etsa stops from eating Shuar only because he offers him birds to eat. We don't learn from the book whether stopping the bird hunt results in further attacks on humans. In other, more complete versions of this myth, Etsa defeats Iwia and then transforms, turning into the sun (Perkins & Chumpi, 2002, p. 56). In these versions, Etsa is an active figure, imparting hunting techniques and survival in the forest to the people, liberating them from the influence of demons. This is very distant from the figure portrayed in the *Etsa* picturebook. The fuller versions of the myth present humanity as the ability to engage in activities that produce life energy (Etsa kills the demon and his wife so that the Shuar can live); those who participate in the relationships of this world by creating and modifying the body, but also by killing, construct a shared social reality in which both humans and *non-humans* function

(Uzendoski, 2012, p. 59). The myth of Etsa encapsulates these relations between the living and the dead; between good and evil; between human and non-human: this, however, is absent in the version presented in the book.

The elements of oneness with nature are also absent from the story under analysis: whether Etsa and the demon are part of something larger, and what the relationships are in the world depicted is not mentioned in the text at all. The myth telling of the most important elements of Shuar culture has been simplified here and reduced to a simple story about an orphaned boy who killed all the birds for the demon and then managed to restore them on the advice of a pigeon. In fact, no cultural element is implied here: were it not for the fact that Etsa is dressed in traditional Shuar clothes and has a specific painting on his cheeks, he could be taken for a representative of any culture. And yet, this myth is not universal: it comes from a specific place and group that represents cultural elements specific only to itself, and the relationship with nature is an important feature and constitutes the cultural order, the perception of history, the present and the future.

The fact that the myth comes from a particular culture and its transmission of the values of a particular group might be the opportunity for a truly postcolonial publication: the text could be bilingual (in Spanish and in Shuaricham); the location could be strictly defined (the area of the Shuar people in the Ecuadorian rainforest), the cultural elements could be placed in a broader context, and the main character could be shown according to his importance to the Shuar. In this way, the reader could be introduced to a different way of interpreting the world, one that understands the unity of man with nature and sees the interdependence between all beings. A picturebook with such elements could move local knowledge (in this case Shuar knowledge), closer to the general mainstream, perhaps opening up further options for its dissemination and thus better understanding of Amazonian contexts and stripping them of the mark of colonial “strangeness”. The book under discussion, however, does not meet these expectations. Published in Spanish and presenting a truncated version of the myth, it presents a story that could come from any culture. Moreover, the text presented does not introduce any deeper meanings: the mere fact of presenting the myth of a local group is not equivalent to spreading the values of a given culture. Rather, it perpetuates a colloquial understanding of indigenous practices which is based on otherness and oddity. Of course, on the one hand it is very good that the Shuar myth has appeared in the internet as an e-book, but one would expect more from such an item than a simple tale without context.

Therefore, in the postcolonial perspective, the picturebook about *Etsa* appears as a missed opportunity. It is true that the local knowledge is shown, but it is shown marginally as the centre of the story includes the events during Etsa’s childhood, and the significance of this character for Shuar mythology and life is overlooked. The beautiful

graphics of the book does present some cultural details (such as the aforementioned facial paintings on the protagonist's face and specific costume, or the use of a blowpipe for hunting – although, in the latter case, a blowpipe made of bamboo is shown, which contradicts the practices of the Shuar, as well as any other Amazonian group, as their blowpipes are usually made from the wood of the *Bactrisgasipaes* palm tree and then wrapped with palm leaf strips<sup>5</sup>), but these elements are not enough to convey the complexity of the local native culture.

Thus, my initial suggestion to use this version of the Shuar myth (given in a form that is attractive to a child) in education is limited: by learning about the *Etsa* story stripped of its cultural meanings, children would get a distorted picture of the group's tradition. The teacher using this item in school work would need to add a lot of commentaries on the Shuar culture, the values represented by it, and the depth of the myth itself; i. e. to fill in everything that is missing from it.

## Conclusions

Michael Uzendoski, describing the textuality and mythology of the Quichua group from Ecuador, emphasises that mythology focuses on encounters and relationships between the human and non-human: plants, animals or spiritual beings.

The co-reproduction of life, the cyclical nature of prey and predator [...] are themes that manifest themselves in myths and in everyday language and cultural practices. Such territorial storytelling of the world allows people to create textual relations in which the narrative of a single life [...] connects to the narrative of all other lives [...] – this is human condition in which people are rooted in a particular place and in relationships with particular communities of plants, animals and trees (Uzendoski, 2012, p. 60).

Moreover, the link between myths and group-specific places and events is reflected in the physical area: e. g. mythological transformations leave a trace in the landscape, so one can refer to them, pointing to a specific place (Uzendoski, 2012, p. 64), etc. Therefore, textuality contains much more than just words: it is linked to a territory, to practices, to language or ritual. And this, among other things, is the reason why a myth that has been written down is deprived of this multifaceted local textuality and becomes just a collection of words describing some events. Of course, this does not mean that local myths should not be written down, as this certainly contributes to their dissemination, but it should be done with context in mind, showing the dependence and importance of the story for the particular group from which it originates.

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5 I have also encountered shiny, black resin-covered blowpipes, which were described as typical of Shuar (field research information, Oriente, Ecuador, 2018).

The *Etsa* e-book fails to meet these demands, simplifying the Etsa myth and thus depriving it of its most important meanings for the Shuar.

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