

Araucanian Shamanism

by Mischa Titiev

Shamanism is a complex phenomenon based on faith in the existence of the supernatural. It has been reported from all quarters of the globe, particularly in the northeastern Asiatic segment of the northern circumpolar region; yet, it has never been precisely defined. As a consequence, traits which one observer puts under the rubric of shamanism, another may put under the heading of magic, and a third under religion.

Just as there is likely to be variation with respect to the choice of nomenclature, so is there likely to be divergence with regard to the traits that should be emphasized when one is discussing shamanism. Thus, some writers will stress costumes and associated paraphernalia such as drums and rattles; others will dwell on the personality characteristics of those who become shamans; and still others, as is true of many anthropologists in the U.S.A., will emphasize differences of training, status or performance, as between "priests" and "shamans".

Despite the great variability open to students of shamanism, there is a fairly measure of agreement on several important points. Almost everyone agrees that shamans, like medicine men, are called upon to perform cures, particularly when a patient's illness is thought to be supernaturally caused. Then, too, observers agree that shamans are usually epileptic, neurotic, or "queer". For example, male shamans frequently act, in varying degrees, like women. It is also a commonplace that wherever priests and shamans exist in the same society, the priests are customarily called upon to conduct the major, socially-oriented, and regularly recurrent rites; whereas the shamans are expected to deal with sudden emergencies and with such lesser supernaturalistic matters as soothsaying, divining, or prophesying. Finally, shamans, far more so than priests, are apt to utilize such things as ventriloquism, sleight-of-hand, trances, and spirit-possession.

Although the Araucanians or Mapuche reside in south-central Chile, far from the traditional homelands of shamanism, their supernatural beliefs and practices show many close resemblances to what may be called "classical" shamanism. To begin with, as has long been noted, "The Araucanians recognize no supreme being with definite attributes. They have no temples, no idols, no established religious cult, and no priesthood. . . ." The highest official to deal regularly with the supernatural is the personage known to the Araucanians as a *machi*, a word that is regularly translated into English as "shaman".

There is every reason to believe that at one time the *machis* were predominantly male, and Latham often uses the masculine article in talking of them.² Whenever they are mentioned, though,

some form of sexual irregularity is likely to be attributed to these males. Even today some men serve as *machis*, and the most powerful are said to be hermaphrodites. (See Figure 1.)

This conforms to an extremely widespread situation which Dr. Mircea Eliade, a leading student of shamanism, has discussed with reference to the Chukchee of northeastern Siberia and many other people throughout the world. Among the Chukchee, Dr. Eliade tells us, there is a class of shamans known as "soft men," who have exchanged "leur vêtements et leur manières d'hommes pour ceux des femmes, et ont même fini par épouser d'autres hommes."³

At the present time, most *machis* "are women who seem to be sexually normal. They marry, bear children, care for their households, and follow the usual feminine occupations, except when engaged in professional activities. A suggestion of homosexuality is revealed in their relations with novices and assistants, and whispers of adultery during *machituns* (curing rituals) are not uncommon, but the older pattern of marked sexual abnormality no longer prevails."⁴

There have been various efforts to explain the Araucanian shift from male to female *machis*. Most often the shift is associated with the decline of masculine prestige following the termination of native warfare; or, as Métraux thinks,⁵ the shift may have been caused by the coming of Christianity, whose doctrines abhor sexual irregularity among men. Another possibility, however, remains to be explored. The presumed center of shamanism, it may be recalled, is in a part of Asia that is reasonably within reach of Chinese influence. It may prove that the effeminate men who frequently serve as shamans are considered to be in keeping with the yang and yin concept that so often calls for the cooperative intermingling of two contrasting elements or principles. Instead of being "queer," therefore, such shamans may symbolize a combination of male and female elements. Further research along this line is badly needed.

The most tangible sign of a modern *machi* is a notched ginger tree trunk known as a *rewe* (*rehue*), which is set before her house, generally at an angle (Figure 2). It culminates at the top in a flat platform, and is usually surmounted by twigs or branches of the cinnamon tree, ginger, laurel, or some other kind of sacred vegetation. Occasionally, a *rewe* has a face carved above the last step (Figure 3), and, not infrequently, a *machi's* *rewe* is placed by her grave when she is buried (Figure 4).

Acquisition of a *rewe* is an integral part of the initiation of a new *machi*. The whole procedure is known as *machilun* or *machiluhun*, and has been fully described by Rodríguez.⁶ Practising *machis* desire apprentices who might serve as their helpers, but there is so close an association between *machis* and witches⁷ that young women frequently refuse to enter the profession and to become apprentices. Consequently, experienced *machis* sometimes threaten female patients with death unless they agree to become future shamans. No matter what leads a person into the profession, though, most *machis* sincerely believe that they had received and heeded a divine call. Nevertheless, although refusal to serve is commonly interpreted as

risking death, cases are known of *machis* who have withdrawn from practice.

There never seems to have been a rigid pattern of procedure for the training of a new *machi*. Apparently, there was and is a great deal of flexibility in detail, but certain aspects are commonly found. Apprentices usually go into seclusion for a while. During this time their mentors give them secret instructions. On occasion, a neophyte goes to live with her tutor during the instruction period, and this practice inevitably gives rise to gossip about homosexuality.

As part of her training, which closely mirrors the practices of shamans everywhere, a novice is taught to diagnose ailments, to learn the therapeutic properties of various plants, to perform cures, to go into ecstatic trances,⁸ to visit the other world, to divine and prophesy, to recite sacred formulas, to mount and descend a *rewe* (See Figure 1),⁹ to sing and dance, and to play a number of musical instruments. One of these, the *kul-truñ*, is virtually on a par with a *rewe* as a tangible sign of a *machi*.¹⁰ A *kul-truñ* is a shallow bowl-shaped drum fashioned from a single piece of wood over which has been tightly stretched the skin of a sacrificed animal. As a rule, each *kul-truñ* is decorated on the outer surface with various symbols drawn with the blood of the sacrificed beast as ordered by the *machi* owner. A *kul-truñ* usually contains a few pebbles of crystal or obsidian so that it may also serve as kind of rattle. It is customarily held in the left hand and beaten with a single drumstick held in the right, but sometimes, when a *machi* waxes ecstatic, she may strike the *kul-truñ* against her head.

When a new *machi* is ready to make her debut in public, she again withdraws from society for a few days. While she is receiving last-minute instructions from *machi* tutors, her family prepares much food and invites many guests. A new *rewe*, about eight feet high, is carved from a single segment of a ginger tree, and implanted at an angle before the new *machi's* house. Sometimes its base is set in a hole that contains a few coins. In such cases, the *machi* may later proclaim that she is trampling on money in honor of the spiritual powers from whom she expects help.

As in the case of the training of novices, the consecration ceremonies (*machiluwñ*) seem to vary widely in many details, although some things are always done. New *rewes* are generally asperged, circuits (*awn*) are made at intervals by mounted men to drive away evil spirits, and for the same purpose the assemblage on occasion clashes sticks and raises the cry of "Ya, ya, YAI!" There is much singing, dancing, whistle (*pifulka*) blowing, the beating of *kul-truñs* at a rapid tempo, and ascents and descents of the *rewe*. Sometimes *machis* fall into the arms of or are embraced by male assistants as they sink to the ground. (Commoners are quick to point out the sexual connotations of such actions.)

Part of the consecration ceremonies simulates Araucanian curing rites, with the novice acting the part of a patient. She is massaged by experienced *machis*, and various parts of her body are violently sucked. This procedure leaves the neophyte's body raw and red, and is usually very painful.

Sometimes, too, cuts are made on the fingers of pupil and teacher, and as they clasp hands their bloods are intermingled. The central idea seems to be that some of the master's power is being transferred to the neophyte. There are also times when the same idea is even more dramatically expressed. In such occasions, presumably by sleight-of-hand, the two principals appear to have exchanged tongues or eyes. It is impossible to tell whether such customs still prevail.

Once her debut is over, and a new *machi* has been proclaimed ready to practice her profession, she is expected to re-dedicate herself and her *rewe* annually. This ceremony is called *ñeikurewen*, and is supposed to be performed during the fiesta of San Juan, which is celebrated close to the time of the winter solstice. Although observers fail to emphasize symbolic mating when a *machi* first acquires her *rewe*, suggestions of marriage are expressed in the re-dedication rites. Use of the word *ñeikurewen* carries implications of sexual or marital relationship for, in Araucanian, "*kurewen*" means a wedded pair, and "*kuretun*" means copulation.¹⁰

Re-dedication ceremonies take place at a *machi's* home. Many guests are invited, and much food and drink are served. At twilight the company surrounds the *rewe*, while the *machi* sings and prays to the good spirits that serve as her familiars. Early the next morning "lengthy prayers are recited, and a lamb is sacrificed. Some of the blood is daubed on the *machi's* cheeks, . . . and the flesh is cooked and served as a sort communion breakfast. There follows a program of prayers, songs, and dances, to the accompaniment of . . . (musical instruments)."

"At intervals the *machi* climbs her *rewe* to engage in solitary prayer. As the afternoon progresses the *rewe* is redecorated with sprigs of cinnamon and ginger, and the celebration concludes with a hearty feast. It is widely held that a *machi's* power will fail and her following diminish unless she is willing to go to the trouble and expense of holding an annual *ñeikurewen*."

All observers are agreed that it is a *machi's* duty to cure the sick, and it is for this reason that these shamans are equated with medicine men or women. The curing rites at which they officiate are called *machitun*. It is practically impossible to understand the nature of these rites unless one knows something of the Araucanian theory of disease.

For all intents and purposes, with the possible exception of death in combat, the Araucanians do not recognize any natural causes of disease and death, not even when they follow an accident or result from old age. To the Araucanians every ailment involves witchcraft. In their opinion a sorcerer (*kal ku*) is always the cause. By the use of witchery he either sends evil spirits to make a person sick, or else, by magical means, he causes a foreign object or poison to enter a victim's body and to make him fall ill. It is a *machi's* function to counteract a sorcerer's work by using her supernatural power to make a person well. Sometimes, too, a *machi* is supposed to divine and reveal the identity of the sorcerer who caused an ailment. All spirits or forces of evil may be known as *wekufü*. It is because they are always thought to be supernatural that the line between witch

and shaman is sometimes so indistinct. As Latham once wrote, "Naturally, the cause (of a sickness) being magical, the mode of discovering and recoving it must also be magical. . . ."¹⁴

Machituns are so troublesome and expensive that rarely is one ordered until ordinary remedies have been tried. When it is decided that a *machitun* is needed, a delegation visits a *machi* and asks for her services. Occasionally, they bring with them some of the patient's undergarments, or a sample of his feces or urine, so that the *machi* may make a preliminary diagnosis. There are also times when those who call on the *machi* bring along a saliva specimen. This is fed to an animal which is later slaughtered. The *machi* then examines various organs for clues as to the nature of the disease.

If the patient can be transported the *machi* holds the *machitun* at her own house. Otherwise, she goes to the patient's house, and has her *rewe* moved there temporarily.

In anticipation of a *machi's* arrival, a number of guests, including at least a dozen men and a few women, are asked to assemble in the sick persons's dwelling. Again, as in the case of other activities involving *machis*, there is no set procedure for a *machitun*.¹⁵ As a rule, however, the *machi* carefully examines the patient, rubs the affected parts, sucks out or otherwise removes the supposed cause of trouble, and provides or applies medicine. The rites also include drum-beating by the *machi* or her assistants, smoking, prayer recitals, dances, and incantations. Every now and then, at a signal from the officiating *machi*, some of the masculine spectators clash hockey or other sticks, and shout, "Ya, ya, YAI!" (See Figure 6.)

Occasionally, the *machi* is supposed to become possessed and to babble with spirit voices. At such times, a specially appointed man (*duñumachife*), known to have a powerful memory, cleverly asks her many pointed questions about the patient's sickness. Later, when the *machi* has returned to normal, this man is supposed to repeat the entire conversation verbatim, and the *machi* is expected to explain whatever "spirit" babblings she had uttered while she was possessed.

Very often during the course of a *machitun*, a *machi* suddenly rushes out of the house and climbs up and down her *rewe*. At the top she is supposed to commune with her spirit helpers, always including the original one that "called" her, and she must carefully scan them to make sure that she is not being deluded by evil beings. Sometimes an ailment is attributed to a temporary loss of soul. In such cases the *machi* is supposed to send her own soul to fetch the wandering soul of the patient. This conforms to a widespread and well-known shamanistic practice.

There is often an element of bi-sexualism in a *machi's* dealings with the other world. Métraux states that while she is effecting cure, a *machi* may address various supernatural beings, one of whom is likely to be a male-female personage. To cite his words, this personage is "un être à la fois mâle et femelle, un dieu-déesse."¹⁰

At some points the *machi* dances about vigorously and ecstatically, ultimately collapsing into the waiting arms of a male helper. Cynics say that *machi's* always choose for this purpose an assistant whose embraces will give them pleasure.

A *machitun* is a very costly and time-consuming ceremony, and the shamans who conduct them are lavishly paid for their services. Obviously, a poor Araucanian never has a *machitun*.

Long ago, all curers were classified into groups on the basis of their procedures. For instance, those who depended chiefly on the use of herbs were called *ampives*, those who "extracted" insects from patients were called *vileus*; and diviners were called *dmquves*. Such subdivisions seem to point toward specialization, but Métraux is of the opinion that *machis* performed all the above activities, being called by different names as they acted in one way or another.

Apart from functioning as curers, *machis* are sometimes called upon to divine the cause of a person's death. In such cases an autopsy is performed and some of the corpse's organs are removed. These are carefully examined by a *machi*, who thus determines the cause of death.

From time to time the Araucanians stage a massive ceremony known as a *ñillatun*. This is the most important of the Araucanian ceremonies. It brings a large number of people to a host reservation, and it is designed either to express the thanks of a congregation for benefits already received from supernatural powers, or to plead with them for future favors.

Since a *ñillatun* calls for communication with the world of the supernatural, one might expect that a *machi* would play a leading part, but on this point much confusion prevails. Moesbach's definition leaves the matter wide open. He writes only that a *machi* is "la intermediaria entre la gente y el mundo de los espíritus."¹⁷ Father Cooper states that former writers on Araucanian customs failed to agree on the participation of *machis* in *ñillatun* rites.¹⁸ Similarly, in the year 1948 I observed two *ñillatuns*, each led by a *machi* (Figure 7)¹⁹; but a few years later Dr. L. C. Faron witnessed a number of *ñillatuns* in which no *machi* officiated.²⁰

The *machi*-less rites were conducted by leaders of reservations (*reducciones*). These headmen are known as *nillatufe*, and Faron believes that they decide whether or not to use a *machi* in the conduct of a *ñillatun*. In fact, he expresses the opinion that *nillatufe* who know the proper prayers and procedure are unlikely to call for the services of a *machi*, a large portion of whose fee they will be expected to pay. Along these lines he hypothesizes that a decline of knowledge and position on the part of *nillatufe* may have led to an upsurge in the use of *machis*.

The question of whether the Araucanians had priests as well as shamans has been long debated. As Latcham once wrote, "El P. Gusinde pone en duda la existencia de los shamanes o sacerdotes aparte de la casta de los *machis* o médicos; dice: "Está abierta todavía la cuestión si entre los Mapuches existía la clase de los sacerdotes propiamente tales, separada de la casta de los médicos. Esta opinión parece sustentada por Rosales, Molina y Medina; pero para sostener la distinción de estas dos profesiones faltan en los escritores antiguos las pruebas suficientes."²¹

Nevertheless, Faron designates *nillatufe* who conduct *ñillatuns* as "priests,"²² and he calls *machis* "shamans". This would establish a tie between sociopolitical and religious leadership. Such a connec-

tion has more than once been postulated. For example, the suggestion has been made that in times past every chief had his own *machi*, and Métraux even opines that each *rewe* may anciently have been the sign of a particular political unit. Latcham, who strongly believed that the Araucanians were once divided into totemic groups, thought that totemic leaders might formerly have delegated some of their functions to professional shamans. Otherwise, he has written, *machis* were merely onlookers at *ñillatun* observances conducted by chiefs.²³

The tendency to link socio-political with religious leadership is a common phenomenon of primitive societies, and remnants of the tendency sometimes persist in societies that are far from primitive. One has only to cite in this connection the Japanese belief, prior to 1945, that their emperor was a living god. Whether or not the Araucanians, had they been left to their own devices, would have developed an institution like that of "divine kingship," must, in the light of history, remain forever a matter of speculation.

On the whole it seems best to equate Araucanian shamanism with the general level of their pre-conquest and pre reservation social and cultural development. Throughout the world it will be found that tribal groups whose subsistence pursuits yield little or no reliable surplus, are unlikely to have classes of full-time specialists, including religious officers. In these circumstances, a society's dealings with the supernatural are likely to be carried out by such personages as shamans, rather than by full-time priests. It is in such a context that Araucanian shamanism can best be understood.

Bibliografía

- (1) Richard E. Latcham, "Ethnology of the Araucanians," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 39, 1909, p. 345.
- (2) Richard E. Latcham, *La organización social y las creencias religiosas de los antiguos Araucanos*, Santiago, 1923, p. 627, et passim. Father Gusinde also speaks of *machis* as males. See, for example, P. M. Gusinde, "Medicina e higiene de los antiguos araucanos," *Publicaciones Museo de Etnología y Antropología*, Año 1, Santiago de Chile, 1917, pp. 87-122.
- (3) Mircea Eliade, *Le Shamanisme*, Payot, Paris, 1951, p. 234.
- (4) Mischa Titiev, *Araucanian Culture in Transition*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1951, p. 118.
- (5) Alfred Métraux, "Le Shamanisme Araucan". *Revista del Instituto de Antropología de la Universidad de Tucumán*, Vol. 2, Tucumán, Argentina, 1939-42, pp. 309-382. Métraux' essay is by far the most comprehensive study of the subject to have appeared in print.
- (6) Euliojio Robles Rodríguez, "Costumbres y Creencias Araucanas," *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, Tomo cxxx, Santiago de Chile, 1912.
- (7) John M. Cooper, "The Araucanians," *Handbook of South American Indians*, J. H. Steward, editor, Volume 2, Washington, 1946, p. 752. "The line between the shaman (*machi*) and the sorcerer (*kaiku*) cannot always be easily drawn."
- (8) Mircea Eliade, "Shamanism," in *Forgotten Religions*, V. Fern. editor, The Philosophical Library, New York, 1950, p. 304. "The thing that is peculiar to Shamanism," writes Eliade, "is... the ecstatic technique which permits the shaman to fly up to the Heavens or to descend to Hell." (Italics in the original.)
- (9) According to Eliade, *op.cit.*, pp. 302-303, a notched tree trunk often

enables a shaman to make a symbolic ascent to the other world. In many cases, too, such a tree trunk represents a Tree of the World or a Cosmic Tree, which is thought to be located at the center of the world.

- (10) Eliade, *op.cit.*, p. 304, tells us that in some tribes the shamanic drum "is supposed to be made of the very wood of the Tree of the World... That means that the manipulation of this drum is already the equivalent, in a certain sense, of the symbolical ascension of the Tree of the World."
- (11) Mischa Titiev, *op.cit.*, p. 120, footnote 21.
- (12) From time to time the guests drive off evil spirits by shouting the traditional cry of "Ya, ya, YAI!"
- (13) Mischa Titiev, *op.cit.*, p. 121.
- (14) R. E. Latcham, "Sickness, Death and Burial among the Araucanians," *The South Pacific Mail*, Valparaiso, Nov. 20, 1924, p. 52.
- (15) A great deal of material, both general and specific, on the conduct of machituns may be found in S. T. Guevera, *Historia de Chile: Chile prehispanico*, Santiago, Balcells & Co., Vol. II, 1929, pp. 114-140; R. E. Housse, *Une Eponée indienne: les araucans du Chili*, Plon Paris, 1939, pp. 232 ff.; R. E. Latcham, "Sickness, Death and Burial among the Araucanians," *The South Pacific Mail*, Valparaiso, Nov. 20, 1924, p. 62; A. Métraux, *op.cit.*, pp. 340-348; P. E. W. de Moesbach, *Vida y costumbres de los indígenas araucanos...* Santiago, Imprenta Cervantes, 1939, pp. 66, 350-370; F. Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán, *Cautiverio Feliz*, Coll. *Historia de Chile*, Vol. 3, Santiago, 1863, pp. 159 ff.; and M. Titiev, *op.cit.*, pp. 115-117.
- A number of various songs that are sung by machis are given in F. J. de Augusta, *Lecturas Araucanas*, Padre Las Casas, Imprenta "San Francisco." 1934, pp. 303-321.
- (16) A. Métraux, *op.cit.*, p. 333.
- (17) P. E. W. de Moesbach, *Voz de Arauco*, Imprenta San Francisco, Padre Las Casas, Chile. 1944, p. 129.
- (18) J. M. Cooper, *op.cit.*, p. 752.
- (19) M. Titiev, *op.cit.*, pp. 128-141.
- (20) L. C. Faron, "Death and Fertility Rites of the Mapuche (Araucanian) Indians of Central Chile," *Ethnology*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April, 1963, pp. 135-56.
- (21) R. E. Latcham, *op.cit.*, (footnote 2), p. 676.
- (22) Not everyone would agree with this usage. Some anthropologists would object to calling any official a priest who did not dedicate himself primarily to sacerdotal pursuits. Moreover, *nillatufe* are not formally trained to deal with the supernatural world, and they never wear distinctive garb or use distinctive implements. Use of the term "priest" may imply no more than the kind of terminological preference discussed in the opening paragraphs of this essay.
- (23) R. E. Latcham, *op.cit.*, p. 677.



Figure 1. A male machi and his assistants. The machi, holding a kul-truñ, is in the center. The assistant at the left holds a gourd rattle in each hand; and the one at the right has a kul-truñ. An Araucanian informant identified the machi as a hermaphrodite who was nicknamed "Alamo".



Figure 2. The home of a machi. This residence is on the reducción of Carrariñe, near Cholchol. Her rewe, set at an angle, is in her front yard.



Figure 3. Another kind of rewe. This rewe has a carved above the last step.

LAMINA XXXVII

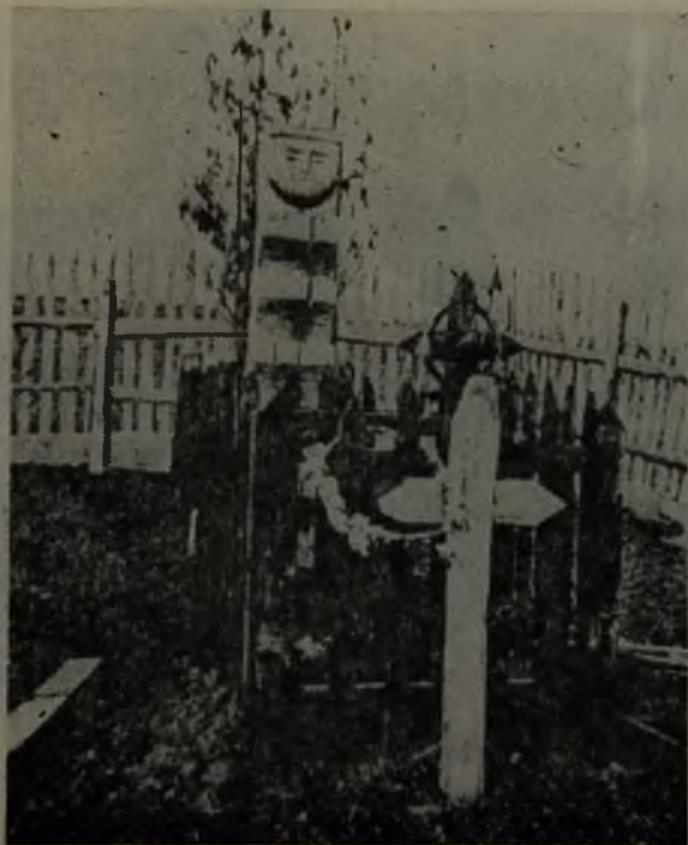


Figure 4. The grave of a machi. This grave, showing the deceased machi's rewe, is in the cemetery of the Malalche reducción.

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Figure 5. A machi ascending her rewe. She has a kul-trun poised in her left hand, and a drumstick in her right. Her kul-trun is decorated with symbolic designs.

LAMINA XXXIX



Figure 6. Part of a **machitun** (curing rite). At a signal from the **machi** in charge, a number of men are supposed to clash sticks, and to shout, "Ya, ya, YAI!" The noise is supposed to drive evil spirits away from the patient.

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Figure 7. A machi in the ñillatun at Coigue. The machi stands with her kul-trun poised as the congregation kneels at the start of a ñillatun. The pipe in the foreground is part of a trutruka, an Araucanian wind instrument with which occasional blasts are sounded.

LAMINA XLI