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A culture of secrecy: the hidden narratives of the Ayoreo¹

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This paper aims at discussing some aspects of the secrecy characterizing sacred texts by the Ayoreo, a Zamucoan population of the Boreal Chaco in South America, from a linguistic perspective. The magic power exerted by words in Ayoreo traditional culture is the reason why holy texts are kept secret, and this makes it difficult to provide a complete linguistic documentation of Ayoreo ‘hidden’ narratives and ritual formulas. After having outlined etiological myths, I will show that language not only can exert a magic power, but that grammar itself, and specifically linguistic gender, has played a role in the development of these sacred narratives. Finally, I will compare some elements of Ayoreo culture with lexical data from extinct Old Zamuco, the most conservative language of the family, in order to show that the populations speaking these languages share the same cultural background.

1. Ayoreo and the Zamucoan family²

Ayoreo is a language spoken by about 4,500 people in a vast area of the northern Chaco divided between Bolivia and Paraguay. It belongs to the Zamucoan family along with Chamacoco, divided into two dialects spoken by 2000 people in Paraguay, and †Old Zamuco. There are no known languages that have a genetic relationship with Zamucoan, but traces of remote contact with other Chaco languages have been described (Ciucci 2014b). Figure 1 shows the internal classification of Zamucoan:

¹ I would like to thank Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald, Pier Marco Bertinetto, Alice Cavinato, R. M. W. Dixon, Brigitta Flick, Andrea Hollington, Nico Nassenstein, Gabriella Erica Pia and Anne Storch. I also would like to express my gratitude to my Ayoreo informants and to two anonymous reviewers. I am the only responsible for any error this article may contain.

² **Orthographic conventions:** Ayoreo has a Spanish-based orthography established by missionaries (see Ciucci 2014a), but here for reasons of clarity I will provide, in italics, the phonological transcription of Ayoreo words. In these cases I will not capitalize the initial letter when required by English orthographic rules, with a few exceptions when the Ayoreo orthography is identical to the phonological transcription and this improves readability. Data from Old Zamuco are reported in Chomé’s orthography (also based on Spanish). An important source of data for Ayoreo lexicon is Higham *et al.* (2000).

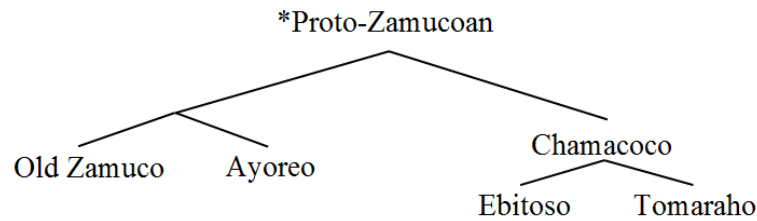


Figure 1: Internal classification of Zamucoan (Ciucci & Bertinetto 2017)

Old Zamuco was spoken in the 18th century in the Jesuit mission of *San Ignacio de Samucos*. Comparison shows that it is the most conservative language of the family (Ciucci 2016 [2013], Ciucci & Bertinetto 2015, 2017). Most of the documentation available so far consists of a grammar by the Jesuit Ignace Chomé (Lussagnet 1958), but the recent rediscovery of Chomé's dictionary has made available the most important source of data for this language (Ciucci, forthcoming). Old Zamuco and Ayoreo are very close to each other from a lexical point of view (Kelm 1964, Ciucci 2016), whereas they only share 30% of lexical similarity with Chamacoco. However, Old Zamuco and Chamacoco show common features not found in Ayoreo (Ciucci 2016). Recent linguistic studies show that Ayoreo does not directly stem from Old Zamuco, but from one or more sister languages, already spoken at the time of the Jesuits (Ciucci & Bertinetto 2015; Ciucci 2016). Not much is known about Old Zamuco culture (see Combès 2009 for the available historical sources), but there are hints that the Old Zamuco ethnic population had the same cultural background as the ancestors of the Ayoreo. In fact, although the Ayoreo had the first stable contact with Western culture in 1947, they were largely affected by previous contact with Jesuits, and at least a number of their ancestors had lived for a while in the Jesuit missions (Fischermann 1988, 1996; Combès 2009). In conclusion, although there is no language continuity, one can speak of cultural continuity between Old Zamuco and Ayoreo, and in §7 I will discuss some relevant lexical items which have never been analyzed before and confirm this hypothesis. For a general introduction to Ayoreo culture, see Zanardini (2003). For more historical details on Zamucoan people, see Combès (2009).

The secrecy of Ayoreo holy texts addressed in this paper has to do with the Ayoreo religion. I will not deal with the Chamacoco, because their religion is considerably different from that of other Chaco populations, including the Ayoreo. This is possibly due to the influence of populations related

to the Jê people from Amazonia (Cordeu 1997). Chamacoco culture has gradually lost the traditional secrecy concerning its religion and mythology (Cordeu 2006).

2. On noun morphology in Zamucoan

Zamucoan languages have a number of rare typological features (Bertinetto & Ciucci 2015), such as the presence of para-hypotactical structures (Bertinetto & Ciucci 2012) and the peculiar system of nominal suffixes (Ciucci 2016; Bertinetto, Ciucci & Farina, forthcoming). For the purpose of the present paper, one has to briefly outline nominal suffixation. All Zamucoan languages are fusional. Nouns and adjectives have the same suffix which expresses gender (masculine or feminine), number (singular or plural) and ‘form’. What we call ‘form’ is a unique feature of Zamucoan, where one can distinguish a base form (BF), a full form (FF) and an indeterminate form (IF). The nominal suffixes of Ayoreo are shown in Table 1.

	Base form	Full form	Indeterminate form
Masculine singular	<i>-Ø</i>	<i>-i</i>	<i>-nik, -rik, -tik</i>
Feminine singular	<i>-Ø, (-e)</i>	<i>-Ø, (-e), -a, -ia</i>	<i>-nak, -rak, -tak,</i>
Masculine plural	<i>-o, -jo</i>	<i>-ode</i>	<i>-niŋo, -riŋo, -tigo</i>
Feminine plural	<i>-i, -ji</i>	<i>-die, -idie</i>	<i>-niŋi, -riŋi, -tigi</i>

Table 1: Nominal suffixation in Ayoreo

The morphosyntax of the forms is similar in all Zamucoan languages. The singular base form diachronically coincides with the original root and is often the starting point for any morphological operation. The base form essentially carries out nominal predication, while the full and indeterminate forms are used in argumental position, as is evident in the contrast between the base and full form of ‘jaguar’ in (1) and (2). The indeterminate form differs from the full form, because the indeterminate form conveys non-specific reference, as in (3). The forms also have other uses; for more details on Ayoreo grammar, see Bertinetto 2014[2009].

- (1) Ayoreo (QCCB, II: 35; cit. in Bertinetto 2009: 40)

<i>karatake</i>	<i>ke</i>	<i>don</i>	<i>pedro</i>	<i>a</i>
jaguar.MS.BF	RET	don	Pedro	MOD

‘It was a jaguar, don Pedro!’

- (2) Ayoreo (QCCB, II: 36)

<i>te-uniña</i>	<i>mu</i>	<i>karata-j</i>	<i>t-ðraha</i>	<i>gesi</i>
3-be_surprised	but	jaguar-MS.FF	3-throw_into	outside

‘He was surprised when the jaguar came out.’

- (3) Ayoreo (QCCB, II: 28)

<i>a</i>	<i>ore</i>	<i>te-aña</i>	<i>aharame-tike</i>	<i>aramoro-rake</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>dehi</i>
MOD	3P	3-follow	armadillo-MS.IF	brown_brocket-FS.IF	MOD	3.EXIST

‘They are following an armadillo, or perhaps a brocket deer.’

In Ayoreo, gender assignment of human nouns follows their natural gender (with few exceptions). In the rest of nouns, gender assignment is arbitrary, despite some general tendencies: for instance, plant and tree names are mostly feminine. Adjectives, demonstratives and possessive classifiers agree in gender with nouns. One has to consider at least gender, number and form while citing Ayoreo nominals,³ because the criteria used for the citation of Ayoreo nominals are often incoherent in many existing publications. For instance, the endonym *Ayoreo* /ajoreo/ is in fact a masculine plural of the base form,⁴ but the ethnic population is also referred to in the literature as *Ayoreode* /ajoreode/ which is the masculine plural of the full form, so that these variants for the name of the population are just two different forms within the same paradigm. In the present paper I shall mostly concentrate on gender, indeed, as I will show, gender, expressed in the same suffix along with number and form, has played a role in the genesis of Ayoreo sacred histories.

3. The centrality of the ‘word’

Even though in this paper I refer to the traditional Ayoreo culture, I do not want to give the impression that it is still fully preserved in their current lifestyle, with the exception of the few isolated Ayoreo living in remote forest areas. The Ayoreo language is still alive, although endangered,

³ The same also applies to the other Zamucoan languages. Many nouns also have a prefix indicating the person of the possessor (see Ciucci 2010), which is also indicated in the glosses.

⁴ Considered on its own, *ajoreo* means ‘(we/you/they) are Ayoreo’.

while many aspects of their culture have almost completely been abandoned and many elements of their traditional knowledge are at risk of getting lost forever.⁵ This also applies to traditional stories and ritual formulas. Nevertheless, their traditional vision of the world may re-emerge in the attitude of the people towards these holy texts, which are considered ‘prohibited’ and therefore kept secret.

Leaving apart minor subtypes (see Otaegui 2014), one can distinguish two main types of holy, and thus secret texts: myths, in Ayoreo *adode* (3.MS.FF), and ritual formulas or *sarode* (MP.FF)⁶. These kinds of textual productions are not only kept secret from foreigners, but a great deal of myths are only known to shamans. Since nowadays all shamans are old, there are only a few people left who can tell the traditional stories, so that it is difficult to document *sarode* and complete *adode*. The age and the failing memory of the only possible informants can also account for the loss or scarcity of information on many narratives (see Pia [2014: 48-53] for the difficulties of documenting stories).

The motivation for secrecy in Ayoreo culture has to do with the centrality of language in the traditional religious beliefs, according to which some particular stories or formulas exert a power on reality: it is not the person who pronounces some words, or the spirits listening to them, but the words themselves which can have magic power (Otaegui 2014). For this reason, *adode* and *sarode* are kept secret and regarded as dangerous. This prohibition is generally referred to in the literature by the adjective *pujak* (MS.BF) ‘prohibited, forbidden’, which in the Ayoreo culture refers not only to the prohibition, but also to the dangerous consequences implied by its violation. Since *pujak* is a base form and, as such, has predicative function, when used alone it properly means ‘it is prohibited, it is forbidden’; its masculine singular full form is *pujaj*. The concept of *pujak/pujaj* is not only limited to the pronunciation/revelation of sacred texts, but applies to other aspects of the Ayoreo traditional life (see Otaegui 2011). Sacred texts have attracted most of the scholars’ attention, often giving the impression that all Ayoreo texts are permeated by secrecy, but the Ayoreo also have narratives or songs which do not have any religious aspect and are not prohibited (cf. Otaegui 2014: 53). For non-sacred textual productions by the Ayoreo, one can consult Riester & Zolezzi (1985), Amarilla-

⁵ For the cultural situation of the Ayoreo people at present, and the influence exerted by contact with Western civilization, see Bessire (2011, 2014). In Otaegui (2014) there are many interesting observations on the current way of life of the Ayoreo in the community of Jesudi, in the Paraguayan Chaco. On the situation of the Ayoreo urban communities in Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia), see Roca Ortiz (2008).

⁶ The respective masculine singular full forms are *adi* and *sari*.

Stanley (2001), Estival (2005), Zanardini & Amarilla (2007), Otaegui (2014), and Amarilla & Zanardini (2016).

The act of telling myths (*adode*), independently of the narrator's intention, can have magic consequences, often nefarious (see the examples in Idoyaga Molina 2000: 69-98), positive in other cases: for instance, according to an informant, the myth, or better the fragment(s) of the Ayoreo myth, reported below (see ex. 4, §4) was said to bring about a good harvest. Myths are only known by shamans and the degree of secrecy depends on each myth or even on single parts. Telling something taboo (myths or ritual formulas) is considered very dangerous for both the narrator and the listener. This can also have repercussions in the community where something secret has been revealed and this is another factor which prevents people from telling sacred stories: the narrator could be accused by the community of having caused negative events. For instance, some years ago the Ayoreo attributed a series of divorces occurring at around the same time to the fact that a myth had just been recounted on a local radio (Otaegui 2014: 81-82).

This has relevant consequences for the available documentation of myths: in Bórmida (2005 [1973-1979]) and Fischermann (1988) many myths are incomplete or interrupted, because according to the informants it was dangerous to tell the rest of the story. Comparing the collections of Ayoreo and Chamacoco myths published at UCLA (cf. Wilbert & Simoneau 1989 for Ayoreo and Wilbert & Simoneau 1987 for Chamacoco), one can note the remarkable shortness of Ayoreo myths. This is due to the religious taboo and to the strategies to overcome the curse associated with the act of telling each particular story. Indeed, telling the whole story is taboo, but not all parts of the story are considered dangerous, or not all of them are associated with the same degree of taboo, so that it is possible to reveal these parts, and even to summarize stories, inasmuch as no prohibited details are mentioned. For this reason, the general outlines of many stories are known without the breaking of any taboo, but the length of the story is often inversely proportional to the strength of the prohibition of each myth. Of course, the attempts by the anthropologists to get complete versions of myths have been numerous, and there are several anecdotes concerning the strategies employed in order to let Ayoreo people reveal their myths despite the curse associated with them, or concerning the consequences that telling a prohibited story has had.

The young and brilliant anthropologist Lucien Sebag committed suicide in 1965. According to the Ayoreo this was due to the fact that he had been told prohibited stories by a shaman, who allegedly suffered from mental disorders as a consequence of his prohibited revelation (Bórmida 2005, I: 106). Pia (2016: 41) reports that Sebag brought another informant to Sucre, far from the Ayoreo communities, so that the dangerous consequences following his revelations could not manifest themselves in the Ayoreo territory. Telling a prohibited myth can have consequences going much beyond a single unlucky event: Rosadé, one of the informants who had worked with Sebag and Bórmida, had to face social disapproval for having told myths and ritual formulas, because according to the people of his community this had caused accidents, so that he had to abandon his village (Idoyaga Molina 2000: 89-91). Gabriella Erica Pia could have access to many stories and ritual formulas only after having been adopted by the clan *etakōri* (Pia 2014: 48). Since the degree of prohibition varies according to the single myth, she could collect those stories which are taboo for the non-Ayoreo, but which can be recounted to the members of the community. After that, she needed years before she was able to record one particular story which was considered extremely dangerous (Pia 2014: 54-56). In many cases her informants wanted to remain anonymous and often only shared with her fragments of stories, or stories in a very short form, in order to avoid unpleasant consequences (Bertinetto, Ciucci & Pia 2010: 112-113).

4. Field linguists facing secrecy

The importance of language in the Ayoreo religious belief has paradoxically inauspicious consequences for the field linguist working with Ayoreo, because this limits the range of textual productions available for analysis. Given the difficulties experienced by anthropologists, sacred texts can only be documented to a limited extent by a linguist. Owing to the taboo, it is almost impossible to record a whole sacred text and to analyze it with a linguistic consultant. Pier Marco Bertinetto (p.c.), for instance, reports that an informant was terrified when he was asked to help transcribe a recorded story narrated by an old shaman, because he thought that the recorded content could have been taboo. The informant relaxed when he realized that the shaman was just telling the story of his

own life. Since working with a native-speaker is a requisite for a good-quality transcription (Dixon 2010: 322), it is virtually impossible for a linguist to provide a reliable transcription of complete sacred texts; moreover, also in the case of experienced anthropologists working with Ayoreo, nobody can ascertain how much has gradually been revealed and how much will remain concealed (or be lost) forever. Considering that an anthropologist such as Pia had spent many years living with the Ayoreo, thus gaining their trust that allowed her to collect *adode* and *sarode*, the possibilities for a linguist to go deeper into the analysis of these texts are limited.

Another factor which limits the access to this knowledge is the traditional mistrust by the Ayoreo towards non-Ayoreo, in particular Western people: while the word *ajorej* (MS.FF) means ‘human being’, the word used to refer to non-Ayoreo, *kopoj* (MS.FF), is a derogatory term properly referring to someone who is a “silly, coward, who thinks in the wrong way” (Fischermann 1988, my translation). Those who gain their trust are no longer considered *kopone* (MP.FF), but this is a very difficult process (Pia, p.c.). Meanwhile, Ayoreo have developed mistrust towards ethnographers, because they have the perception that scholars come to get their secrets in order to sell them (see for instance Bessire 2014 and the works by Pia). In other words, the greed of foreign scholars can expose the Ayoreo community to risk and peril.

While a linguist is not required to share the vision of the world of the community where they work, they should respect the local beliefs in order to be trusted. For this reason, gaining at least a basic understanding of the culture one is about to meet is a necessary step of fieldwork preparation. This is not difficult in the case of Ayoreo, on which there is a considerable amount of literature. Since a linguist collects texts for the purpose of language documentation, and the kind of text plays a secondary role, one should avoid asking informants to narrate something which could, so to say, put him/her in trouble. One of my informants, Vicente, had a particular talent for telling stories. Even though I did not dare ask him to tell me myths, because they are taboo, he spontaneously recounted *adode*, but limited the narration to fragments of stories which he felt allowed to share with me. As an example, I report below the transcription with glosses of a mythological story I have recorded:

(4) *tei* *sike(r)e* *te-ise* *jok-aj-ode* *ore* *nani*
 EVID spring.FS.FF 3-meet 1P-father-MP.FF 3P long_ago⁷

ega *tei* *ore* *todo* *tei* *ka* *ore* *te-i(r)aha* *kutea-rike*
 CONJ EVID 3P 3.be_afraid EVID NEG 3P 3-know thing-MS.IF

u=gu *ute* *uhe* *te-aŋaj* *ore* *jui.*
 COP=EMPH that.MS REL 3-come 3P 3.toward.MS.FF

‘Apparently, the spring met our fathers long ago and, apparently, they were afraid and did not know what it was, that thing which came toward them.

tei *use(r)eŋa* *ore* *jui* *ŋa* *tei* *ore*
 EVID big_noise 3P 3.toward MS.FF CONJ EVID 3P

te-apome *mu* *tate-j* *aha* *uho-(r)ike* *ani(r)e*
 3-run but agouti-MS.FF ADP 3.PCLF:fellow-MS.IF PHAT

kuteiso *tei* *ore* *te-aka(re)* *tei* *ore* *te-aka(re)* *ga* *tei*
 animal.MS.BF EVID 3P 3-stay EVID 3P 3-stay CONJ EVID

ŋora-j *he* *u* *ka(ra)ta-j.* *udo,* *kutea*
 3.companion-MS.FF EMPH COP jaguar-MS.FF these.MP thing.MS.BF

ga(r)-ode *udo,* *tei* *uhe* *ore* *g-aŋe* *sike(re).*
 two-MP.FF these.MP EVID SUB 3P 3-PCLF:general.FS.BF spring.FS.BF

Apparently, a big noise [came] toward them and they ran away, but the agouti with another fellow animal remained, apparently, they remained [repeated twice], and, apparently, (his) friend (now) is the jaguar. These, these two things (remained), apparently, because it is their spring [scil. they are not afraid of the spring].

tei *ore* *t-ibidi* *na-ŋoa-ne* *nani* *uhe*
 EVID 3P 3-call RFL-companion-MP.FF long_ago REL

ore *te-ajo=ke.* *tei* *ore* *te-oŋiŋa:* *“aŋi-ŋo* *ej!*
 3P 3-run=RET EVID 3P 3-say 2.IRLS.come_back-P INTERJ

a *kutea* *p-ibos-o.* *ŋa* *tei* *ore* *u(r)asa-iso*
 MOD thing.MS.BF GF-food-MP.BF CONJ EVID 3P 3.companion-ANAP.MP

tei *or* *te-aŋi* *ore* *gaj.* *tei* *ka(r)ata-j* *te-oŋiŋa:*
 EVID 3P 3-come_back 3P 3.body.MS.FF EVID jaguar-MS.FF 3-say

Apparently, in those good old times they [scil. the human beings] called their companions who run (i.e. had run) away. They said: “Come back! (there) is food.” And, apparently, their already mentioned fellows came back toward them. Apparently, the jaguar said:

“a *j-itodo-go* *kutea* *p-ibo-tigo=ke* *ŋa* *sike(r)e*
 MOD 1-be_afraid-P thing.MS.BF GF-food-MP.IF=RET CONJ spring.FS.FF

ani(r)-one *kutea* *tei* *te-utaj* *n-aŋepid-ode*
 3.PCLF:general-MP.FF thing.MP.BF EVID 3-ask_for RFL-place-MP.FF

ani(r)enie *tei* *te-utaj* *p-ahopite* *itea-de* *he*
 PHAT EVID 3-ask_for GF-cleared_land.MS.BF new-MP.FF EMPH

⁷ Here I indicate between parenthesis segments dropped in the speaker’s realization.

<i>geŋa-j</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>te-utaj</i>	<i>p-eŋake</i>	<i>ao-de.</i> "
corn-MS.FF	MOD	3-ask_for	GF-plantation.MS.BF	previous-MP.FF

"We were afraid of the food, and the things of the spring are asking for their place, so to say, they ask for new cleared lands, the corn asks for the previous plantations."

This is a typical myth I have recorded. I have chosen a very short story only for reasons of space, but the same considerations apply to longer narratives. The myth does not seem to make much sense or have a hidden symbolic meaning. The narrator simply told me what he could, so that I did not actually record the whole myth, but just a fragment, a piece of the story which was not prohibited. According to Pia (p.c.) it is also possible that in the text above the informant just mixes allusions to different myths, thus avoiding to properly narrate something prohibited. The vast majority of the stories recited to me by the same informant have more or less the same features in terms of completeness of the narration. In other cases the informant told me that he could not go on telling the story, because only Ayoreo people could listen to the rest of it. The people who are allowed to know each story vary depending on the degree of danger, and only the shamans have virtually access to all *adode*. My informant was a middle-aged speaker and not a shaman, so that in some cases it was possible that not even he knew the whole story. Since I was aware of the prohibition and out of respect, I did not dare ask for more information or details. This is, however, an example of how some aspects of the traditional Ayoreo culture still survive despite the remarkable cultural shift experienced by this population in the past decades.

5. Etiological myths

In this section I will focus on one kind of mythological narratives, that is etiological myths. In Ayoreo mythology, virtually all non-human entities (natural phenomena, plants, animals and traditional objects) are the result of a transformation of an Ayoreo person who, for different reasons, decided to turn into the given entity.⁸

⁸ In some cases there can be some degree of variation, mostly depending on the single informant, concerning whether all entities, in particular objects, were people: see for instance the comparison of data by different informants done by Bórmida (2005, I: 44-46). But here one has to keep in mind the above mentioned limits in the analysis of Ayoreo mythology and that not all informants have the same knowledge of *adode* or *sarode*.

(5)	<i>eram-i</i> world-MS.FF	<i>taniṣa-j</i> beginning-MS.FF	<i>iṇoke</i> 3.NEG.EXIST	<i>por-idie</i> tree-FP.FF	<i>iṇoke</i> 3.NEG.EXIST	<i>kuteis-ode</i> animal-MP.FF
	<i>gusu</i> only	<i>ajore-ode</i> person-MP.FF	<i>ihi</i> ADP	<i>eram-i</i> world-MS.FF	<i>ajore-ode</i> person-MP.FF	<i>te-iṇoniṇase=re</i> 3-change_completely=3.RFL
	<i>aha</i> ADP	<i>por-idie</i> tree-FP.FF	<i>he</i> and	<i>aha</i> ADP	<i>kuteis-ode</i> animal-MP.FF	

‘At the beginning of the world, there were no trees, no animals, (there were) only people (i.e. the Ayoreo) in the world, the people changed completely into trees and animals’ (Bertinetto, Ciucci & Pia 2010: 115).

The people who in a mythological past gave rise to the entities of this world are the ancestors of the Ayoreo and are called *ṇani bahade* (lit. ‘the first men’, MP.FF), if they were men, and *ṭeṭe bahedie* (lit. ‘the first women’, FP.FF) if women (Pia 2014: 49). They are also called *kuteade kikuḥaidie*, lit. ‘the ancestors of the things’,⁹ or *kikuḥaidie* (3.FP.FF) ‘the ancestors’. For reasons of simplicity, I will refer to them as ‘the ancestors’.¹⁰

In etiological myths, the entities are generally named after the ancestors who turned into them. The ancestors also belong to one of the seven clans into which the Ayoreo are traditionally divided (cf. Bórmida 2005, II: 187-205 and Fischermann 1988): all entities are assigned to a clan and there is a distinction between strong and weak clans depending on the high or low number of entities that they symbolically own. For a list of entities and the respective clans, see Fischermann (1988).

Just before their transformation into entities, the ancestors left some ritual formulas (*sarode* MP.FF) which can be used for specific purposes, such as healing a certain disease. Generally, each mythological ancestor has his/her own ritual formulas or *sari* (MS.FF). *Sarode* can in principle be used by everyone (not necessarily a shaman) and listening to them is not taboo, but they can only be pronounced when they are needed, otherwise there could be bad consequences for the person who uses the formula and for the whole community. The same occurs if *sarode* are not repeated correctly, and this implies that not all people have the courage to learn them; hence, nowadays only a few

⁹ ‘The first men’, *ṇani bahade*, and ‘the first women’, *ṭeṭe bahedie*, are adjectival phrases inflected in full form; in Ayoreo adjectival phrases, the first element is always in singular base form, the last element takes the number and form required by the referent and the context, see Bertinetto (2014: 396-397).

¹⁰ As pointed out by Bórmida (2005 II: 13-14), the word *kikuḥaidia* (3.FS.FF), *kikuḥaidie* (3.FP.FF) is a compound. It is a feminine noun which is also used to refer to men. Another example is *asute* ‘chief, military leader’ (3.FS.BF/FF), which is feminine but only refers to men (for an explanation of the latter exception, see Ciucci & Bertinetto 2017: 321).

people know *sarode* (Pia 2014: 52; Pia 2016: 54). For these reasons, documenting ritual formulas is extremely difficult (on ritual formulas, see Sebag 1965a,b; Fischermann 1988; Bertinetto, Ciucci & Pia 2010; Otaegui 2014; Pia 2014). Otaegui (2014: 86-109) provides interesting examples of how *sarode* are still used today, despite the availability of modern medicine. One informant told Pier Marco Bertinetto (p.c.) that he knew many ritual formulas because as a child he used to assist healers who used *sarode*, and tried to remember them. *Sarode* are often also called *uṇarone* (3.MP.FF) in literature. Otaegui (2014) uses *uṇarone* to refer to a particular kind of *sarode*. The word *uṇari* (3.MS.FF), *uṇarone* (3.MP.FF) properly means ‘breath’ and is used to refer to the whole healing process, which involves both the recitation of a *sari* and the act of blowing on the person who is sick; in some cases it can also include the myth from which the *sari* originates. *Sarode* are generally short; the interested reader can find transcriptions of *sarode* in Fischermann (1988) or in Pia (2014, 2015, 2016, 2018). Also, because of the taboo character of *sarode* it makes an in-depth analysis with a linguistic consultant almost impossible.

Pia has systematically documented myths and ritual formulas from Ayoreo shamans and old people since 1984. Her Ayoreo anthropological dictionary (*Diccionario antropológico ayoreo*) is in the process of publication. This massive work, which will presumably continue many years, aims at making accessible a cultural heritage which is about to disappear, and such a dictionary is an unprecedented effort because of the quantity of materials collected. So far, only the first four parts have appeared (Pia 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018) and many more volumes are in preparation. Pia has assembled, like pieces of a mosaic, many fragments of Ayoreo myths, often narrated at different times by different informants over years of work. According to Pia, since only shamans have access to complete information, one of the main problems was to find old shamans who still knew *adode* and *sarode*.

6. Grammatical gender and Ayoreo myths

The ancestors turning into entities in Ayoreo etiological stories always have a well-defined natural gender, which, like linguistic gender, is never confused by the speakers (Pia 2016), although the

Ayoreo are not aware of the reason why an ancestor belongs to one or the other gender (Bórmida 2005). I have analyzed myths reported in Pia's *Diccionario antropológico* (2014, 2015, 2016, 2018), Bórmida (2005 [1973-1979]) and Fischermann (1988), in order to compare the natural gender of the ancestor who turned into a certain entity with the grammatical gender of the corresponding Ayoreo common noun. I only considered stories for which there is enough information on the natural gender of the characters and on the transformation they have undergone. Such data is often lacking, since many texts are very short for the above discussed reasons. My analysis suggests that the gender of the ancestor always coincides with the morphological gender of the common noun.¹¹ Table 1 shows some examples.

Ancestor name	Natural gender	Meaning of the common noun	Morphology of the common noun	Source and information on social gender
<i>ahakarataj</i>	male	type of plant (<i>Jatropha grossidentata</i>)	<i>ahakarataj</i> (MS.FF)	Pia (2014: 74-76; 2016: 115-116); see <i>teikōri</i> .
<i>doridi</i>	male	type of bird (<i>Psarocolius decumanus</i>)	<i>doridi</i> (MS.FF)	Pia (2016: 96); <i>doridi</i> was the partner of <i>tejojo</i> (see above); they turned into birds together.
<i>duruṇaj</i>	male	type of palm (<i>Trithrinax schizophylla</i>)	<i>duruṇaj</i> (MS.FF)	Pia (2014: 59); <i>duruṇaj</i> was a boy who used to perform female activities.
<i>ereṇaj</i>	male	climbing plant with violet flowers	<i>ereṇaj</i> (MS.FF)	Bórmida (2005, I: 34); <i>ereṇaj</i> was a shaman who became evil, because women did not like him.
<i>gojide</i>	female	type of bird (<i>Icterus icterus</i>)	<i>gojide</i> (FS.BF/FF)	Pia (2016: 97-98); <i>gojide</i> was a beautiful woman who turned into a bird because too many men fell in love with her.
<i>hutikaj</i>	male	deerfly	<i>hutikaj</i> (MS.FF)	Pia (2016: 112); <i>hutikaj</i> was both a military leader and an evil shaman.
<i>karaj</i>	male	type of bird (<i>Ramphastos toco</i>)	<i>karaj</i> (MS.FF)	Pia (2016: 106); <i>karaj</i> was a honey hunter.
<i>karataj</i>	male	jaguar	<i>karataj</i> (MS.FF)	Pia (2015: 34); <i>karataj</i> was a military leader.
<i>kuja</i>	female	type of tree (<i>Cynophalla retusa</i>)	<i>kuja</i> (FS.BF/FF)	Pia (2016: 71); <i>kuja</i> was an evil female shaman.

¹¹ I have only found two apparent exceptions which will be discussed in §7.

<i>kurude</i>	female	red stone used for makeup	<i>kurude</i> (FS.BF/FF)	Pia (2016: 93-94, 108-109); <i>kurude</i> was an attractive woman with wonderful makeup.
<i>teikōri</i>	male	tuber plant that holds water (<i>Jacaratia corumbensis</i>)	<i>teikōri</i> (MS.FF)	Pia (2014 74-75; 2016: 115-116); <i>teikōri</i> killed his brother <i>ahakarataj</i> , who was the lover of his wife.
<i>tejo</i>	female	type of bird (<i>Trogon curucui</i>)	<i>tejo</i> (FS.BF/FF)	Pia (2016: 96); see <i>doridi</i> .
<i>usere</i>	female	type of plant (<i>Dioscorea alata</i>)	<i>usere</i> (FS.BF/FF)	Pia (2015: 33); <i>usere</i> was a woman who made skirts, an activity prohibited for men.

Table 1: Ancestor names and common nouns in Ayoreo

If in the plot of the story an entity is named after an ancestor, in the ontogenesis of that story, the grammatical gender of the Ayoreo common nouns has determined the natural gender of the characters associated with them, and, consequently, many aspects of the etiological myths.¹² Ayoreo myths have been elaborated by shamans through the visions they have when they are in ecstasy (on shamanism in Ayoreo and how ecstasy is provoked, see Sebag 1965a,b). When they are in trance, shamans communicate with natural entities, which appear in the form of the ancestors who turned into them. For this reason, shamans are able to provide descriptions of the human being associated with each entity (Idoyaga Molina 1998). This is an example of how grammatical gender affects cognition, providing a source of metaphors, whereby the linguistic gender of an entity turns into its natural and social gender (Aikhenvald 2016).¹³

In Ayoreo stories, the natural gender of the ancestor is correlated with its social gender: men are military leaders or honey hunters, women make skirts or wear makeup (Table 1). In some myths, overcoming social gender differences caused the loss of human nature: *duruñaj* (a young male) was transformed into a plant, because he performed some activities which are only allowed for women, such as picking the caraguata plant (Pia 2014: 59). There are also stories concerning attractive

¹² For the other factors which have played a role in the creation of the mythological characters associated with each entity, see Bórmida (2005).

¹³ What happens in Ayoreo is the opposite of the principle of mythological association, whereby the linguistic gender of some nouns is assigned on the basis of legend and beliefs, as in the Australian language Dyirbal (Dixon 2015: 19-43); see Aikhenvald (2016: 120-121) for examples from other languages. Of course, one cannot exclude that mythology might occasionally have influenced linguistic gender, but this is far from certain and could only have happened in a few words such as ‘sun’, which are morphologically irregular (Ciucci 2016: 454) and were very significant from a religious point of view. By contrast, the secrecy of Ayoreo myths makes it difficult for these stories to produce systematic changes in the language.

women, who turned into entities because of the problems originated from their beauty. Ancestors of opposite sex formed a couple and turned into different entities (see Bórmida 2005, I: 50-51): *doridi* (male) and *teoyo* (female) were partners who decided to go and live together in the forest, where they turned into birds. Love can also have bad consequences: *ahakarataj* (male) fell in love with the wife of his brother *teikōri*, who subsequently killed him. All of these stories have been shaped by the arbitrarily assigned grammatical gender of the common nouns, which has influenced the shamanic vision of the world. At the same time, there is no cultural evidence that entities were named after dead people who may have had some particular connection with them during their lifetime, so that one should exclude the hypothesis that ancestors are eponyms.

7. Cultural continuity between Old Zamuco and Ayoreo

We do not know anything about the secrecy of holy texts in Old Zamuco culture. The extensive lexical similarity between Ayoreo and Old Zamuco suggests that they shared the same culture, so that one can surmise that the nucleus of Ayoreo myths and ritual formulas dates back at least to the cultural and linguistic split between Ayoreo/Old Zamuco on one side, and Chamacoco on the other, if not to the historical stage in which Proto-Zamucoan was spoken (see Figure 1). Moreover, some Ayoreo holy texts show traces of contact with the Jesuits (see Bórmida 2005; Combès 2009; Fischermann 1996), thus confirming that the Zamucoan populations met by the Jesuits also included at least some ancestors of the Ayoreo, who spoke one or more sister languages of Old Zamuco. A remarkable example is for instance a *sari* reported by Fischermann (1988, 1996: 138-139) in which a Jesuit father is seen from the perspective of indigenous people frightened by the diseases brought by contact. The new data available from Chomé's Old Zamuco dictionary (Ciucci, forthcoming) permit better analysis of the cultural continuity of Old Zamuco and Ayoreo from a linguistic perspective.

The presence of the Christian God, *Dupade* (MS.FF), in Ayoreo myths is an innovation of the Jesuit period. The word corresponds to Old Zamuco *Tupāde* (MS.FF), which derives from Guaraní *Tûpá* (Montoya 1640: 323) via Chiquitano, the main language of the Jesuit missions of southeastern

Bolivia. In Old Zamuco, final *-de* is a rare suffix for the masculine singular full form, and in Ayoreo *-de* has remained as a relic in a few nouns, such as *Dupade*.

The Ayoreo word for non-Ayoreo, *koṇoj* (MS.FF), is found in Old Zamuco; the comparison is more straightforward if one compares the base forms: cf. Ayoreo *koṇok* (MS.BF) ‘non-Ayoreo’ ~ Old Zamuco *coyoc* (MS.BF) ‘enemy’. There is a slight semantic difference between the two words, because Old Zamuco *coyoc* means ‘enemy’, which explains the derogatory meaning of Ayoreo *koṇoj* / *koṇok* and shows that the hostility towards foreigners is rooted in the cultural tradition.

The word for ‘shaman’, the repository of knowledge, is the same in both languages: cf. Ayoreo *daiṇa* / *naiṇa* (MS.BF) ‘shaman’ ~ Old Zamuco *naina* (MS.BF) ‘shaman’. While religious secrets and myths were taboo for Chamacoco women, among Ayoreo women can also be shamans, and this also happened among Old Zamuco-speaking people, as suggested by the presence of the feminine form for ‘shaman’ in Chomé’s dictionary, cf. Ayoreo *daiṇe* / *naiṇe* (FS.BF) vs. Old Zamuco *naine* (FS.BF) ‘female shaman’.

The cognate of Ayoreo *pujak* (MS.BF) ‘prohibited’ is found in Chomé’s dictionary of Old Zamuco: *puyac* (MS.BF) ‘prohibited, not good’, but in the few occurrences of the dictionary it does not refer to religious taboos.

Although in Old Zamuco no cognate of the Ayoreo forms *adode* (3.MP.FF) or *sarode* (MP.FF) has been found, there are two compounds which seem to refer to mythological stories: (i) *cucha copenotioddoe* ‘old stories’ < *cucha* (MS.BF) ‘thing’ + *copenotioddoe* (MP.FF) ‘old’; (ii) *aute copenotioddoe* ‘old stories’ < *aute* (2S.MS.BF) ‘custom’ + *copenotioddoe* (MP.FF) ‘old’. The presence of two compounds for ‘old stories’ is in itself remarkable. In addition, there is also the possessive noun phrase: (iii) *cucha copenotioddoe utac* ‘teller of old stories’, with *utac* (MS.BF) meaning both ‘superstitious’ and ‘one who speaks’. Since the author of the dictionary was a missionary, the translation of ‘superstitious’ seems to indicate something referring to the traditional religion; *utac* is found in the compound *cucha utac* ‘superstition’ < *cucha* (MS.BF) ‘thing’ + *utac* (MS.BF) ‘superstitious’; considering that there are several Old Zamuco terms referring to someone who speaks/tells something (without any particular nuance), *utac* seems to refer to someone who speaks about uncertain or ‘superstitious’ concepts, i.e. proper of another religion from the point of view of a

missionary. If this is so, the ‘teller of old stories’, *cucha copenotioddoe utac*, is someone who tells sacred and supposedly hidden narratives. Interestingly, the word *copenoti* (MS/FS.BF) ‘old’ has no cognate in Ayoreo.

Ayoreo *uṇar* (3.MS.BF) ‘breath’, often used to refer to ritual formulas, is *uyare* (3.MS.BF) ‘breath’ in Old Zamuco, but there is no hint that the latter noun was associated with the religious sphere.

In the myths analysed, there is one exception to the correspondence between the natural gender of the ancestor and the grammatical gender of the common noun, which shows the cultural continuity between Old Zamuco and Ayoreo. In a myth reported by Fischermann (1988), *kukuṇa* was a boy who turned into the type of rodent (*Ctenomys boliviensis*) known by the same name. The word *kukuṇa* (FS.BF/FF) is feminine in Ayoreo, but its Old Zamuco cognate *cucudda* (MS.BF) ‘type of rodent’ is masculine. Indeed Old Zamuco was the earliest documented and the most conservative Zamucoan language,¹⁴ so that one can surmise that here linguistic gender shift has occurred in Ayoreo and that the myth originated before this change. For *kukuṇa*, the Old Zamuco data show full correspondence with the natural gender of the Ayoreo mythological ancestors, and this is further evidence that Ayoreo and Old Zamuco share the same cultural and linguistic background.

8. Conclusions

In this work I have discussed the issue of Ayoreo holy texts from the perspective of a linguist, pointing out how the taboo associated with these oral productions, *adode* (myths) and *sarode* (ritual formulas), makes their linguistic analysis extremely difficult. Then, I have focused on etiological myths, where the ancestors of the Ayoreo turned into the world entities named after them. In actual facts, shamans must have created these stories naming the characters after the entities that originated from them. In Ayoreo, grammatical gender (masculine or feminine) is mostly arbitrary, but it has exerted an influence on Ayoreo culture, because the gender of common nouns was a determining feature in the creation of the mythological characters.

¹⁴ See the many examples in Ciucci (2016) and Ciucci & Bertinetto (2015, 2017).

Lexical comparison between Old Zamuco and Ayoreo provides hints that both languages were spoken by people sharing the same cultural background. In §7, for instance, I discussed a case in which, according to the data available, gender shift has occurred in the Ayoreo common noun, but the original linguistic gender, observed in Old Zamuco, is preserved in the Ayoreo myth. The role played by the grammatical gender on Ayoreo myths has so far never been considered, but this is a case of how this grammatical feature can shape the world (Aikhenvald 2016). In this particular case, the shamans, in their ecstatic visions, unconsciously shaped the mythological world of the Ayoreo after the grammatical gender of the animate and inanimate entities by which they were surrounded. As Aikhenvald (2016: 121) puts it: “Linguistic Genders influence beliefs, superstitions, and poetic metaphors revolved around an inanimate referent, which is then promoted to the status of an ‘honorary’ human, or ‘anthropomorphized’”. This is precisely what has happened, but, unlike in the many cases in which linguistic gender has been a mere source of poetic inspiration (Aikhenvald 2016), the Ayoreo anthropomorphized entities have been turned into the real characters who gave rise to all entities in the world. In other words, in the religious belief, the actual mitopoietic process (grammatical gender of the real entity > natural gender of the mythological creature) has been reinterpreted in the reversed order (natural gender of the mythological creature > grammatical gender of the real entity). Next to numerous but artificial psycholinguistic experiments to assess the influence of linguistic gender on cognition (Aikhenvald 2016: 127), one might consider the genesis of Ayoreo myths a unique natural experiment in which linguistic gender has subconsciously affected the human cognition, thus influencing the secret culture of a whole population.

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Abbreviations

1, 2, 3 = first, second, third person

IF = indeterminate form

ADP = adposition
ANAP = anaphoric marker
BF = base form
COMP = complementizer
CONJ = conjunction
COP = copula
DIM = diminutive
EMPH = emphatic
EVID = evidential
EXIST = existential
FF = full form
FP = feminine plural
FS = feminine singular
GF = generic form

INTERJ = interjection
IRLS = irrealis
MOD = modality
MP = masculine plural
MS = masculine singular
NEG = negation
PCLF = possessive classifier
PHAT = phatic
PROSP = prospective
RET = retrospective
REL = relative
RFL = reflexive
SUB = subordinator