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## Defining Religion, Defying Tradition?

### Concord and Conflict about the Role of Religion in a Costa Rican Indigenous Community

#### Introduction

When approaching the issue of power, some fundamental questions always arise: Who is in a position to define? When, where, for whom, and why? These are also underlying questions in the particular case that I shall discuss here: Discourses about the role of religion among Bribris in Talamanca, the indigenously dominated area in south-eastern Costa Rica.<sup>1</sup> I will look at how 'religion' is defined by different actors, and into how the same actors understand religion in relation to what they see as other aspects of society and culture – in particular what the Bribris refer to as *siwá*, a concept they often translate into Spanish as *tradición*. In doing so, I wish to highlight how different actors discuss and negotiate the role of 'religion' in a particular cultural and historical context. For analytical purposes, I propose that defining should be seen as a practice that delimits something and gives it a certain place or space in relation to something else. To define is then to exercise power. As a consequence, discourses about the definition and role of religion in Talamanca are seen as both practices of, and contests about power.

Before I set out, it should be stated that this must be seen as a first outline of the topic. To my knowledge, there has been no previous academic attempt to describe in detail the pluralistic character of the religious situation in Talamanca, nor do any scholarly analyses of the ongoing discourses about religion exist. In other words, there is still much research to be done. This preliminary attempt to sketch the situation is based on material gathered during two periods of fieldwork in 2000 and 2001, the

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1 The area is culturally pluralistic, but the indigenous groups the Bribri and Kabèkir are the most numerous. Here I shall only deal with Bribris and non-indigenous persons.

main purpose of which was to focus on one religious group, the Bahá'ís (see Tafjord 2004). To capture the broader picture was then first and foremost a task of contextualisation. Despite this limited scope, it is still worthwhile to make this initial effort to identify some of the unfolding processes, especially considering the positions and perspectives of the first group of actors that I wish to draw attention to.

### Foreign Academics

Since the late 1960s, a significant number of *sikuapa*<sup>2</sup> (foreigners) have done research in Talamanca. When commenting upon religion, these scholars all speak of the *indigenous* religion of the Bribri.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, they have rarely mentioned that most Bribri are either Christians (Adventists, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals or of other denominations) or Bahá'ís, and that these are what most Bribri consider to be their 'religions'.<sup>4</sup> What the *sikua* academics describe as 'indigenous religion' is not considered to be 'religion' by a large majority of Bribri.

### *Siwá*

Shortly after my arrival in the village of Mojoncito, the now late Don Rosendo Jackson, then a highly respected elder and a Bahá'í, told me about the past:

The Bribri did not have any religion before. Religion is something the *sikuapa* have brought to Talamanca. But the old Bribri knew Sibö. They knew the laws and rules that Sibö had given them, and they lived the way Sibö had decided and did as he had told. Since the old Bribri were

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2 *Sikuapa* (pl. [*sikua*, s.]) is used to refer to 'foreigners', meaning persons that (1) are not Bribri; or (2) are not considered indigenous; or (3) are considered to be of European ancestry. Here it is used in the last meaning listed.

3 See, e.g., Aguilar 1986, Borge and Castillo 1997, Borge and Villalobos 1998, Borge 2001, Bozzoli 1986, Cervantes 1990, Ferreto 1985, González and Gonzáles 1994, Guevara 1993, Jara and García 1997, Kjelstadli 2001, Palmer *et al.* 1992, Stone 1962.

4 The two books that do deal with foreign religions among the Bribri (Drüg 1995 and Quesada 2001) must both be seen as primary sources presenting parts of the history of the Catholic mission in Talamanca.

so respectful and lived as Sibö had obliged them to, they did not need any religion.<sup>5</sup>

During my stays, variations of this history, or argument, were told time after time, by elders as well as younger people, and by Bahá'ís, Christians and atheists alike. It refers to their story of the creation of the world we live in; a fascinating story that the limited space unfortunately prevents me retelling here.<sup>6</sup> In short, it describes how Sibö – one of the most active persons in this creation process – contributed to the creation of the first Bribris who were the very first human beings. For a period after this beginning, Sibö stayed with them to teach them all they needed to know. Ever since, it is told, this knowledge has been transmitted and cultivated down the generations.

In what is considered its most pure form, this knowledge is found in a vast corpus of stories that, to Bribris, explains 'where we come from', 'what the world is like [to us]' and 'what is right for us'. Alongside and intertwined with the stories is a sophisticated repertoire of more or less ritualized actions, linked, e.g., to weather conditions, agriculture, hunting, food consumption, travel, pregnancy, birth, illness and death. Taken together, these are often referred to as the most important and authentic representations of *sivá*.

As most Bribris see it, *sivá* represents the order of the world. They hold the ideas and practices of *sivá* to be fundamental to their way of life and to their relationship with the cosmos. They regard it as a core element of their culture; it is what they consider to be *most* indigenous or *most* Bribris; and it is what – in their own eyes – distinguishes them from others (who in turn are thought to have different representations of *sivá*). Its performance, the telling of the stories and interpreting them as well as the acting out of the rituals and defining general correct behaviour, are in many cases highly specialised activities, only carried out 'in its right way' by the right kind of specialists.<sup>7</sup>

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5 'Los antiguos bribris no tenían alguna religión. La religión es algo que los *sikuapa* traían a Talamanca. Pero los Bribris de antes conocían a Sibö. Ellos conocían las leyes y reglas que Sibö les dio, y vivían como Sibö había decidido y hacían como él había dicho. Por que los antiguos Bribris fueron tan respetuosos y vivían como Sibö les había obligado, ellos no necesitaban alguna religión.' See also Tafjord 2004: 97.

6 For versions of the story, see, e.g., Bozzoli 1986, Ferreto 1985, Jara and García 1997, Cutimanco 2001, Vargas 1994, Palmer *et al.* 1992, Stone 1962, Tafjord 2004.

7 For a more detailed outline of *sivá*, see Tafjord 2004: 97–136.

## Scholarship and Politics

Now, there is no doubt that selected parts of *sivá* could easily fall within an academic definition of 'religion', and it would, of course, be perfectly legitimate to isolate such parts and treat them as 'religion' for analytical and intellectual purposes, as my precursors have done. However, in doing so, the discourses about the role of religion in Talamanca are easily lost sight of, discourses in which foreign scholars also play a part.

*Sikua* academics have contributed to the formation of a small but influential university educated group of young and middle-aged Bribri political leaders. In situations of the more formal kind where *sikuapa* are involved, many of these leaders present themselves as atheists. Nevertheless, when addressing other Bribris, or on more informal occasions, many of them are more than willing to speak of certain ritualized parts of *sivá* – much in accordance with *sikua* academics – as their inherited indigenous 'religion'.

Many of the young leaders, and most – if not all – of the academics that I have met, are sceptical about the roles that newly imported and adopted religions now play in Talamanca. According to them, foreign religions do not belong in Bribri society and culture, and should therefore not be given any place there. But although the indigenous reserves are autonomous in many respects, when it comes to the question of religious freedom, national law and international conventions have to be followed. The formal political leadership, mainly composed of these young leaders, is thus prevented from prohibiting representatives of different religions proselytizing in the area. Yet, labelling selected parts of *sivá* as 'religion' can in some contexts be understood as a strategy to face the challenge of the 'religions' that are brought into Talamanca from the outside, and to counter what is seen as cultural decay.

Together, the academics and the young political leaders – as 'experts' and policy makers – are the ones with the largest opportunity to present, and thereby define, the Talamancan religious situation to the rest of the world. A world with ever increasing communications also has an impact on the discourses about the role of religion that are taking place within Bribri society.

## The Arrival of the Religious

Yet, the young politicians should be seen as the exception that confirms the rule. In most situations, the vast majority of Bribris do *not* consider

*siwá* to have anything to do with 'religion'. To them, 'religion' is something *sikuapa* have brought to Talamanca. Let me once again turn to history, but first from an outsider's perspective, that is, the perspective of those who brought 'religion' there.

Even though the area was visited by Europeans as early as Columbus's fourth voyage, it very soon became a distant outpost in the Spanish empire. The indigenous resistance, the climate, the topography and the structure and governing of the colonies, made the few attempts at settlement by the Spanish short-lived. A united indigenous uprising in 1709 put an end to sporadic missionary efforts; the area was left in the hands of its inhabitants, and before long, practically forgotten (Blanco 1983, Fernández 1969, Ibarra 1990 and 1999).

For the following 250 years, no foreign missionaries lived in Talamanca. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, some occasional excursions were made to the area by a few ardent clergymen, but the duration, the infrequency, and the lack of linguistic and cultural skills of the visitors made the impact of these expeditions minimal. The indigenous cultures, with their ways of life and worldviews, could continue to develop relatively unaffected by the turbulent events going on in other parts of the Americas (Blanco 1983, Drüg 1995, Fernández 1969, Gabb 1978, Ibarra 1990 and 1999, Quesada 2001).

It was not until the 1960s, when new infrastructures made access to the area less hazardous, that missionaries once again tried to settle in Talamanca, and this time with more success (Drüg 1995, Lamb 1995). But they were not only Catholics, representatives of other Christian denominations, as well as Bahá'ís, were now eager to save the souls of the lost tribes of Talamanca. A missionary race started, one which is still continuing.

For several reasons, by the 1960s the national state authorities had become more interested in gaining control over the area and in assimilating its population into what was imagined to be a national culture. As a means of achieving this, the state supported Catholic missionary activities. The first public schools in the area were started in the mid-1960s and were run by Catholic missionaries (Drüg 1995). Former pupils recount their experiences in the classrooms where indigenous culture was treated as inferior and the children were told that they were better off abandoning it. Speaking Bribri was not allowed at school. Specialists dedicated to the performance of the more ritualized parts of *siwá* were depicted as practitioners of false and even devilish cults. Of course, this was not looked upon as reasonable by most Bribris.

## The Adoption of 'Religion'

When Bribris recount their history, they refer to the same events: the arrival of Columbus, their victories in the uprisings, and the periods of peace and autonomy. They proudly portray their ancestors' political, military and cultural strength and their obedience to the laws of Sibö. They also talk about the difficulties that the arrival of the *sikuapa* caused them, and how foreign influence has come to threaten the foundations of their culture and society.

Even so, both the Bribris' and the missionaries' stories confirm that there was a widespread interest in the new narratives<sup>8</sup> of the world and ritual practices that the *sikuapa* introduced as 'religion' (see Tafjord 2004). Within a short period of time, foreign 'religions' gained a significant number of followers in Talamanca. I have not yet met or heard of any person in Talamanca, who has not at some point been involved in one or more of the 'religions' brought in from outside. Even the young leaders, who lately present themselves as atheists, or what could be called traditionalists, all have a past with some kind of affiliation to a foreign religion.

In Bribris society, the privileged position of the elders give them every right to define what is right for their families. This was the case some 45 years ago and still is so today. The elders were the ones who had the last word, not only in relation to themselves, but also in relation to their entire families, when the opportunity to choose a 'religion' appeared.<sup>9</sup>

Why should they *not* adopt a 'religion'? As long as they respected *siwá*, there was in principle nothing to prohibit them from taking up a 'religion'. If the practice of 'religion' could help them to achieve benefits and cope effectively with the events of the world, then why not take advantage of it?

According to many who later describe the situation, the old Bribris had no need for 'religion', but the turmoil caused by the arrival of increasing numbers of *sikuapa* had a strong impact on Bribris society and culture. It accelerated changes in many institutions, ideas and ways of doing things. There is every reason to assume that talk about social corruption and cultural decline was extensive in the 1960s, as it is today. Nowadays, it is claimed that what Sibö has prescribed is no longer followed as before.

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8 The use of the term 'narrative' here follows that of Gavin Flood (1999).

9 Evidence of the strength of this relationship (which is first and foremost a matrilineal one) can be seen, e.g., from the fact that conversion from one religion to another usually takes place only after one's mother, and often also her edler brothers, have passed away. See Tafjord 2004.

Many, especially among the elders, express their hopes in 'religion' and its moral codes as a means of countering this development, and even of contributing to the restoration of the original order that the elders were familiar with from their youth or had heard stories of from their ancestors. Not that it is thought that the old times can be brought back exactly as they were. New times call for new approaches, and a new way to re-establish the workings of Sibö's rules is now seen to be through 'religion'. In this way 'religion' has suddenly become a necessity, the argument goes.

### Variations

New ideas and new ritual practices were, of course, not a novelty as such in Talamanca. Present Bribri culture and identity are linked with of hundreds – if not thousands – of years of cultural change resulting from creative invention, continuous adaptation and exchange with close neighbours as well as distant people. What is considered Bribri is contingent on the historical context.

Today Bahá'ís, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists are strongly represented on the indigenous reserves, while representatives of other religions such as TM (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and several other Christian denominations frequently visit the area with the purpose of propagating their faiths and attracting new members. Consequently, the discussions are not just about the role of 'religion', but also about the different roles of different 'religions'.

As families have chosen different religions, new groups and alliances have been formed based on religious affiliation. To a certain extent these groups tend to coincide with long since established social networks based on kinship relations, but in many cases they also cross and challenge these bonds. Besides, these new groups form part of larger groups that extend to other parts of the country, and even other parts of the world, in which *sikuapa* are fellow adherents. Each of the religions has also introduced a new hierarchy, with persons on different levels authorised to define what is right for others.

This is the larger picture. Before I move on to comment upon other groups of actors in the discourses in question, some clarifying remarks are required. Among Bribris, as well as among *sikuapa*, there are obviously different positions. It goes without saying that I can only comment upon the roles and positions of some of the groups that, in somewhat different

ways, are involved in the discourses. The extent to which these groups here may seem to be homogenous is more likely to be a result of my categories than of their actual compositions and dynamics. One should also be aware that the act of defining, in praxis, is very much dependent upon the particular context or situation – and the roles different persons have in it – when it is performed. Evidently this paper simplifies a much more complex and dynamic picture. That said, it is time to take a closer look at how members of five of the once foreign religions approach the theme (in alphabetical order).

### *Bahá'ís*

During my fieldwork I spent more time with Bahá'ís than with all the other groups taken together, and it is from them that I have most often heard the story of how the Bribris in the old days did not have and did not need any religion. Bribris who are Bahá'ís clearly state that their religion is something different from their own tradition. *Siwá*, they say, is what they are born with, while religion is what they have chosen to believe in. This, however, is not to say that they do not compare and relate the two.

When appropriate, they emphasize that particular teachings of the Bahá'í faith confirm what they have always known, adding that it is just that nowadays they need religion to reinforce some of it. The religion, they claim, has also helped them to reach a better understanding of their past. Bahá'í teaching has, for example, made them realize that Sibö – alongside among others Krishna, Jesus and Muhammed and, more lately, Baha'ú'lláh – was a messenger from God, not a god himself. Furthermore, this integration of Sibö into the Bahá'í genealogy of prophets, provides tradition with the opportunity to attest that the Bahá'í faith is, in don Rosendo's words, 'the right religion for Bribris today'. Obviously, they interpret their religion in light of *siwá*, and vice versa. In this sense, the new religion and *siwá* are used to legitimate each other. Even though there are differing views about the extent of the relations between the one and the other, there is a high degree of concordance in stating that such a relation exists and that it is the most important reason for choosing the Bahá'í religion over other religions.

Once *sikuapa* with contacts and/or positions higher up in the Bahá'í hierarchy enter the scene, tension rises. It goes without saying that the foreigners warmly approve of the Bribris' dedication to important aspects of their common religion. They also agree with the Bribris that the religion

is strengthening Bribri culture. But what the foreigners also immediately observe – and what Bribris immediately see that the foreigners observe – is (1) that Bribris tend to focus on those practices and teachings of the Bahá'í faith that they somehow recognise as belonging to their indigenous tradition, and (2) that Bribris, when it comes to practice, more often than not, do not care about, or actively ignore, those parts of the Bahá'í faith that they understand contradict the ways of *síwá*. Moreover, the climate does not usually get any better when foreign Bahá'ís start talking about what Bribris consider to be central parts of *síwá* as 'superstition'.

### *Catholics*

The Catholic clergy working in Talamanca are without exception *síkuapa*.<sup>10</sup> Two German priests, now in their 90s and 80s, have run the mission since the early 1960s. Their harsh attacks on ritualized practices related to *síwá* and on ways of behaviour different from European customs, have not been met with enthusiasm among the Bribris. Attempts to prohibit and even demonise what the Bribris consider 'right for us' has caused several conflicts.

The Bribri Catholics with whom I talked all asserted that their religion had nothing to do with the stories and practices that the indigenous ritual specialists linked with *síwá*, and that these are something else which are not to be confused with religion. During our brief conversations on the topic, they were reluctant to compare the two sets of practices and narratives about the world, except to say that it was all a matter of paying attention to the laws of Sibö.

In general, attendance at mass is very low indeed.<sup>11</sup> Due to the lack of younger clergymen, the number of services are said to be significantly lower than a couple of decades ago, and visits to remote and/or inaccessible settlements have almost stopped entirely. It should be noted that most persons over the age of 40 are baptised as Catholics. However, many have

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10 For a period there was a young indigenous man who aspired to become a priest, but he gave this up a few years ago when he fell in love with a woman.

11 The maximum number of attendants I witnessed at a mass was four persons (all from one family), apart from the priest and the nuns. However, attendance at religious gatherings alone does not necessarily indicate the religious commitment among Bribris. Similar to how they relate to certain practices of *síwá*, many practices related to the different religions are left to the respective ritual specialists to perform.

later converted to one of the other religions now present in Talamanca, while others still identify themselves as Catholics, but do not participate in the religion's public rituals. The practices performed in private by those belonging to this latter group have yet to be determined.

### *Jehovah's Witnesses*

Among the more active and numerous groups today are the Jehovah's Witnesses. Because of the distance from Mojoncito, where I was based, to their residences, and because they are not closely related to the families with whom I stayed, my encounters with adherents of this group were quite limited. And those I did talk to were not too keen on discussing the subject. I was told that Jehovah's Witnesses sometimes talk negatively about some ritualized parts of *siwá*, but that in practice, they too participate in them when they find it necessary. Naturally, no conclusions can be drawn without investigation.

### *Pentecostals*

How do Pentecostals perceive the relation between *siwá* and their religion? The persons I have been in contact with belong to an autonomous church of the Asamblea de Dios branch, where all the members, including the pastor, are Bribris or have other indigenous identities. The church is located in the vicinity of where I lived. On different occasions, I therefore met one or another of its members almost daily. All of those whom I spoke with about the issue, firmly stated that their religion has nothing whatsoever to do with indigenous culture and their tradition; that these are two completely separate entities or domains: God's almighty will, his universal laws, should not be compared to any cultural tradition. Culture and ethnicity, I was again told cannot be chosen, whereas salvation and the mercy of God, are up to oneself.

When talking to Pentecostals before, during or after their sermons, or in other church-related settings, they usually rejected the most ritualized parts of *siwá*, especially those practices performed by ritual specialists, as 'the works of the Devil' and so forth, whereas in other contexts, this was not the case. Most of them still use the services of traditional ritual specialists when particular situations require it. There have even been such ritual specialists among their members.

### *Seventh-day Adventists*

The Seventh-day Adventists are located in a different part of the area from the one in which I spent most of my time, but coincidences and curiosity made me spend a Saturday with them in their church. During their service, they explicitly condemned the practices performed by the experts in *siwá*, claiming that those who think that is 'religion' are misguided and wrong, and labelling it as 'satanic'. What they say and do on the other days of the week is to me still a matter of rumour.

### **A Matter of Position**

It should be noted that in contexts other than those where the religions were at the centre, I never witnessed Bribris explicitly dismiss *siwá*. When among fellow believers, indigenous representatives from all the religious groups so far mentioned could openly declare that the practices and beliefs of other religions are false or at least not as favourable as their own. On other occasions, when there were members of different religions present, Bribris very seldom raised religion as a theme in discussions. To do so is seen as inappropriate. What emerged in the forefront of the discourses during such gatherings, were the common history and what is seen as indigenous traditions, as well as the present social and political situation, in other words, what unites them as a larger group. Only in situations of great confidence, were religion and attitudes towards various religious practices and beliefs carefully discussed across religious borders.

*Sikuapa* involved in different religions tended to be less apprehensive when proclaiming the superiority of their practices and beliefs. This has led to unease among locals, especially when it has happened at events where representatives from different religions have been present, but also during meetings of a specific religion when *sikuapa* have talked about parts of *siwá* in negative terms. That Bribris themselves, and particularly elders, may be critical of some contemporary practices and interpretations linked to *siwá* by different individuals, is seen as legitimate. They have the knowledge and understanding necessary to evaluate *siwá* – they are part in it. Conversely, *sikuapa* are not part of it and they are not seen as having the knowledge to understand it properly. Hence from an indigenous point of view, they are not in position to judge it, or its relation to the religions.

### Selection of the Fittest

The first *sikuapa* missionaries were in the privileged position of being able to select which parts from what they saw as the entirety of their religions they were to present to Bribris. Since then many Bribris have actively sought information about different religions for themselves.<sup>12</sup> All the same, for practical reasons and because of their positions in religious hierarchies, the privilege *sikuapa* have to introduce Bribris to what they consider to be important parts of their religions has continued. From these selections, Bribris have chosen what to emphasise in their own religious practices and what to build their religious understandings upon.

As already mentioned, when commenting upon the Bahá'ís, religious practices that more or less correspond to, or can be compared with, practices prescribed by *siwá* seem to be quite easily adopted. In this respect, recitation stands out as one of the practices that Bribris of different religious affiliations stress as important and practise frequently. The opposite is the case in relation to practices that somehow contradict the established way of doing things in Talamanca. Such practices are often understood as less important, or at least more difficult to perform. Marriage, for example, in the forms the various religions practise it, is almost absent in Talamanca, despite the efforts of *sikuapa* to convince their fellow believers of its importance.<sup>13</sup> Confronted with this, Bribris usually answer that to make such a deep commitment before God would be too big a step to take at the present time, what if one were unable to keep it? When *sikuapa* have tried to encourage or even threaten them to fulfil more of what they see as their religions' obligations, the Bribris' commonplace reaction has been silence.

Sometimes *sikuapa* have continued to press the issue, despite Bribris' assurances that they will look into the matter in time. This has annoyed many. Combined with insensitive attacks on what are seen as important practices of *siwá*, it has made significant numbers withdraw from communal religious activities. Nevertheless, the majority of such people still maintain their religious identity in private. They maintain that there is nothing wrong with the religion itself. Their problem lies in how *sikuapa* interpret it and try to impose their interpretations: *Sikuapa* have misunder-

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12 Many of the sources they have trusted upon are of course also produced by *sikuapa*.

13 Obviously, sexual relations have been and still are strictly regulated also in Talamanca. However, lifelong relationships have never been the rule.

stood the basic message of their respective religions when they try to tell Bribris what is right and what is wrong for them.

Independent of their attitudes towards and definitions of religion, in most situations Bribris share a high respect for *siwá* and the specialists in its interpretation and performance. It is well known in Talamanca that in cases of illness or other dangers, virtually every indigenous person will eventually seek the knowledge and the help of the ritual specialists who are committed to the various practices of *siwá*, no matter how pejoratively they may have spoken about them in previous religious settings.

### Complementary and/or Competing

Time and space emerge as key categories once a more systematic, analytical approach is taken. Times and places are designated for different kinds of activities, in Talamanca as elsewhere, and different activities may demand different kinds of thinking, maybe even different narratives of the world (Flood 1999). One could argue that Bribris' perceptions of the relation between their religions and *siwá*, and its enactment, are examples of what Tord Olsson (2000), Roy A. Rappaport (1999) and others have spoken of as 'complementary ritual fields'. Each field calls upon specific narratives that do not necessarily correspond with the narratives of other fields, but taken together they can still be perceived as a balanced whole.

When defining *siwá* as 'tradition', or even as 'culture', rather than as 'religion', Bribris avoid getting into conflict with their 'religions' demands of exclusivity when they do what they regard as appropriate or necessary to be in concord with the world as they know it. The practice of what is *not* 'religion' can perfectly well be combined with being a faithful member of the Bahá'í faith or one of the Christian churches.

Yet, if one is to take the actors' own definitions into serious account, it becomes apparent that the 'complementary ritual fields' perspective fails to highlight at least one important aspect of these cases. Whenever a situation appears in which it is not clear which narrative and set of practices are appropriate to a given time and space, then what otherwise may be understood as complementary might become competitive. To follow Gavin Flood, it might become an example of competing narratives and practices. What is more intriguing is that in Talamanca, apparently whatever is at any time seen as *siwá* tends to be decisive in settling these power struggles.

## Language

Language is another compelling element here. The ritualized practices and narratives of the 'religions' are almost exclusively performed in Spanish, and the same goes for much of the discussions about them, although Bribris may also debate them in Bribri. When it comes to *siwá*, the verbal parts of the most ritualized practices are performed by the specialists in a distinctive language reserved only for this purpose. The interpretations and discussions of *siwá* usually take place in Bribri, a language that no *sikua* missionary has ever learned well. Thus, in addition to time frames and space frames, there are also language frames distinguishing the different fields of discourse and admitting or preventing different actors from taking part in them.<sup>14</sup>

## Facts, Beliefs and Assumptions

I would also like to point to a set of categories used by Morton Klass (1995) that I find very helpful when it comes to detecting what might be yet another aspect of the discourses about the relationships between *siwá* and religion in Talamanca. The categories are: 'facts', 'beliefs' and 'assumptions'. 'Facts' meaning what is proven; 'beliefs' refers to all that one has actively chosen to accept; and 'assumptions' refers to everything that is taken for granted.

As I interpret it, most, if not all, of what Bribris consider to be part of *siwá* is either assumed to be beyond question ('assumptions'), or seen as proven ('facts'). On the one hand, *siwá* is what they are born with, it is the way the world is to them, and it effectively affects the very same world that they live in. On the other hand, their religions are what they have actively chosen to accept to believe in. One can choose one's religion, but one cannot choose whether or not to be a Bribri, they argue. The conclusion is that *siwá* and religion seem to be regarded as operating on different levels.

This perspective may also shed light upon how *siwá* – as 'assumptions' and 'facts' – is present in most, if not all, situations in Talamanca, and how religions – as 'beliefs' – are formed upon and confined by the former. Religions are given limited times and places within a larger space that is

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14 For more about the use of different languages in different contexts, see Cervantes 1990 and Tafjord 2004.

defined by *siwá*; times and places with limits that are continuously negotiated. That some specific practices related to *siwá* may be verbally discredited during religious services (where the same practices are absent), does not mean that other parts of *siwá* (that are present) are rejected, nor does it mean that the verbal dismissal will be put into practice after one has left the time, place and language of religion.

Conflicts arise when *sikuapa*, failing to acknowledge most Bribris' differentiation, define their religion as the larger space and reduce *siwá* to mere 'beliefs'. This insensitivity has led religious *sikuapa* to try to interfere with areas of social and political life that Bribris, religious or not, consider separate from the religions' domains.

### A Case that Challenged the Limits of 'Religion'

In the period from June to August 2002 a series of events that further challenged the definitions of religion took place in Talamanca, when a group that introduced themselves as País Global de la Paz Mundial (Global Country of World Peace) appeared on the missionary scene. I was first made aware of what was going when I started to receive e-mails from Costa Rican anthropologists asking me to collaborate with them to put pressure on the national government to take action.<sup>15</sup> A quick search revealed that the new intruders were part of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

The events were soon given broad coverage in the national newspapers.<sup>16</sup> It appeared that a group of Bribris were very interested in what these *sikuapa* had to offer, e.g., the establishment of a new 'spiritual reign' and a donation of several millions in a new 'spiritual currency', and were willing to become followers. Some *rites de passage* had already been performed.

This not only threatened the ideas of some *sikua* academics, but also alarmed the local political leadership and leaders of already established religions. They all expressed their opinion in the press about how the *sikuapa* members of this 'false sect' or 'false religion' were trying to take advantage

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15 Thinking that everyone should be left to make their own choices, I did not of course interfere in any way.

16 See, e.g., *Diario Extra* (18.07.02), *La Nación* (18.07., 28.07., 30.07. and 04.08.02); *La Prensa Libre* (20.07.02).

of the Bribris. Very soon, the minister of national security and, a few days later, the president also commented on the case, giving their assurance that measures would be taken. And action was taken: The leaders of the group, being foreign citizens, were expelled from the country. Locally, the persons that had first shown interest in the new ideas were forced to express their regrets and give up their intentions. It was concluded that what they had faced was *not* 'religion', but some false ideology if not fraud.

### **To be Continued**

The picture drawn in this article is based on very limited material. Before any conclusions can be drawn, much more research must be done. All the same, we are not dealing with a static situation, however, it can be summed provisionally up as follows:

When meeting or referring to the 'other', the common attitude among Bribris is that 'what is right for us might not be right for others' and 'what is right for others might not be right for us.' In Talamanca, it is the elders, and especially those who are specialists in certain parts of *sivwá*, who are entrusted with the authority to define 'what is right for us'. After all, they are the ones who know what the world is *really* like. Even so, their interpretations are constantly challenged in a variety of ways and from differing positions that also mutually challenge each other. Alliances change as contexts change, and what is conceived of as concord and as conflict varies according to participant or the observer. The discourses about the definition and role of religion – or the definitions and roles of religions – are only one important part of larger processes of constant cultural change.

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