



Doing Research in an Enchanted World: Lessons from Indigenous Methodologies¹

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ABSTRACT: Based on prolonged apprenticeship with the indigenous *Gente de Centro* from Colombian Amazonia, this article discusses their research methodologies and the challenges they pose to ethnographic knowledge. Indigenous methodologies suggest that the modern disenchanting method, with its semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and data collection design, is inadequate to account for a world in which everything speaks and does so unexpectedly. Moreover, indigenous people's warning to watch over the effects of knowledge means assuming responsibility towards the world that the act of knowing produces or could produce. In doing so, they underline the inseparability of epistemological, ethical, and political dimensions of research. Anthropology must respond adequately to such challenges if it is to contribute to indigenous cultural and political struggles and remain a credible approach to understanding the world. To do so, it must work against method as a data-gathering technique, and let itself be occupied by the cognitive practices of others.

KEY WORDS: indigenous Amazonia; indigenous methodologies; indigenous epistemologies; decolonizing ethnographic research; bodily knowledge; participatory research

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— Grandfather, can I record you?
— You can, but the deep part the recorder doesn't grasp it.
(Conversation with a Uitoto Muina elder)

The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not mean, therefore, a growing general knowledge of the general conditions of our life. It means something else, namely, that it is known, or it is believed that at any moment one can come to know, that there are no mysterious or unpredictable powers around our lives, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. But this means the disenchantment of the world.
(Weber 149)

“What do you want to know for?” When you ask a *Gente de Centro*² indigenous person for information, very likely you will get this answer. This meta-message that questions the listener about the purpose of knowledge is a warning that there is much more at play than just information.

When I started working with indigenous peoples of Amazonia, I shared the position of a critical and politically committed anthropology for which research cannot be limited to an academic exercise, but it must strive to contribute to the cultural and political struggles of the people with whom we work. Twenty some years later, I have a sense that in spite of good intentions this proposition is sloppy at best, and condescending at worst, since it assumes the contribution to be unidirectional,

² The People of the Center—*Gente de Centro* in Spanish—is a linguistically diverse, but culturally quite uniform cluster of ethnic groups, including Uitoto (Muina Murui), Bora, Miraña, Muinane, Andoke, Nonuya, and Ocaina. It comprises approximately 7,500 individuals who live in the Caquetá, Putumayo and Amazonas regions of Colombia, in the Amazon region of northern Peru, as well as in Colombia's main cities. My collaboration with the People of the Center began in 1996 in the Resguardo Tikuna-Uitoto Kilómetro 6-11, in the Municipality of Leticia (Colombian Amazon). Although the ancestral territory of the People of the Center is located in the Caquetá-Putumayo interfluvium, from the 1950's indigenous families have gradually resettled in the current territory of the *resguardo* as a result of the rubber genocide and diaspora, Colombia's armed conflict, and state policies.



entailing an asymmetrical view of research and knowledge. Such asymmetry can only be ripped apart if we subvert the power order on which it is based, and we take the following question seriously: how indigenous cognitive practices can contribute to make anthropology a more credible approach to understanding the world, and to responding adequately to the challenges the world confronts us with? These issues are implicit in the question, “what do you want to know for?” which, in addition to an inquiry into the motivations of whoever asks the question, is an invitation to participate in a particular vision of knowledge, its methods and ends and not just its contents. It follows the warning: “Knowledge is not to hurt, to humiliate, to dominate others, to be withheld, to be stored...” (quote from fieldnotes). Asking is a serious thing: it demands a commitment.

Since its institutionalization as a central method of anthropology, ethnography vacillated between two alternative pathways. In the first, the hierarchical separation between a subject and an object of knowledge—where the former applies theories to interpret the data provided by the latter—ends up preventing the possibility of a real epistemological and political transformation, besides, I guess, resulting in a shallow understanding. In the second, research is embraced as a joint endeavor, open to accept that one’s methods, theories, ends and modes of knowing may come out deeply altered in the process. If anthropology is to be a “permanent exercise of decolonization of thought” (Viveiros de Castro, *Metafísicas Caníbales* 24) it must work against method as a technique of data collection, and perhaps retrieve the original meaning of ‘method’ as a ‘walking path to move beyond,’ and of ‘technique’ as an ‘art of doing.’ That means to attend to the cognitive practices of others, following along the ways in which they envision, produce, validate, and put knowledge into practice. Clearly, this goes far beyond ‘participation’ and ‘dialogue’, two ubiquitous words in social research methodology sections, but ones that hardly live up to the expectations. The problem is that when participation and dialogue are ‘applied’ they inevitably fail. Eager to implement them as a method, the researcher on duty is caught listing the subjects of discussion, setting the times and places of activities, smuggling in focus groups and semi-structured interviews, and every now and then handing out colored markers. Whenever method does not relinquish control, participation and dialogue continue to be imposed from above. Emptied of meaning, words end up being a scam, for the participants and the researcher as well. Clearly, it’s hard to decolonize method and keep it.

Indigenous methodologies are a most welcomed addition to the discussion of decolonial research approaches (Kovach; Louis; Smith). By showing how methodology is connected to indigenous people’s values and worldviews, these approaches prompt a critical reconsideration of methodology, and of research more broadly. They point out, for instance, that indigenous research paradigms see knowledge as relational, not simply an interpersonal relationship, but a relationship with the entire cosmos. Indigenous methodologies are not concerned with questions of validity or reliability, but with how people fulfill their role in this relationship and what are their obligations, therefore stressing issues of responsibility and care (Shawn). In general, however, these analyses do not provide much detail on the concrete cognitive practices of indigenous



people, while it is precisely a consideration of those practices that can offer lessons for decolonizing the western methodological toolbox.

The purpose of this article is to follow a pathway for rethinking ethnographic knowledge through an inquiry into the research methodologies of the *Gente de Centro*, a cluster of ethnic groups from Colombian Amazonia. I focus in particular on two indigenous research projects in which I participated as co-researcher, and the challenges they offered.³

As in Western science, for the *Gente de Centro* too any research process begins by identifying a problem. The end of research, though, is not to explain reality, but to contribute to generalized well-being. When this is not the case—indigenous people warn—knowledge is being betrayed and the consequences can be catastrophic. During research, particular attention is paid to the “messages of the world” (quote from fieldnotes)—animal sounds, atmospheric changes, dreams, fleeting thoughts, mood and bodily changes—that provide clues about the state of health of the person, the community, and the territory, on which knowledge has direct influence. Cleansing with chili pepper smoke, bathing with aromatic herbs, dieting or sitting still for hours, are key aspects of indigenous modes of knowing. Bodily practices are meant to cultivate a mindful state and to achieve a sensitive connection with the world: “the world warns you: you must pay attention” (quote from fieldnotes). For this reason, a certain topic can only be addressed in particular time-spaces, something that usually upsets the schedules of institutions’ and NGOs’ personnel, and that can leave the anthropologist’s questions unanswered.

Besides the typically human appetite for knowledge, indigenous people investigate for a variety of other reasons, such as demanding rights, organizing, or enduring, and recently, engaging in research has also become a way for indigenous people to make a living. Academic research projects, the Colombian Ministry of Culture, and national and international NGOs have gradually allocated funds to support indigenous research. So, the term ‘indigenous research’ encompasses a variety of practices in which non-indigenous participants play diverse and non-exclusive roles: from proposing and/or sponsoring research, to serving as intermediaries, advisors, or partners. Clearly, indigenous research may arise from circumstances that are not necessarily endogenous, such as an institutional call, or an academic project. Yet, an ‘indigenous’ research is one that captures and transforms an exogenous project according to its own methodologies, purposes, and standards of evaluation. Such appropriation may be the result of more or less overt negotiations with whom controls or wish to control the project. However, appropriation is often pursued undercover, at a parallel level of the observable timetables, objectives, deliverables, and other requirements that the project must meet. There is no doubt that the maneuvers deployed by indigenous people to take control of research are strategies of resistance

³ The ideas presented here are based on my collaboration with the people of the indigenous Resguardo Tikuna-Uitoto Kilómetro 6-11 from 1998 to present. The two projects were carried out with grants from the Fondo Mixto-Ministerio de Cultura, Health Secretary of the Amazonas Department, Spencer Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation, and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.



against the disciplinary power exercised by Western science. On a deeper level, they reveal complex theories and methods of knowledge. This requires those who join in research to pay attention not only to contents, but to research praxes, ends, and forms of evaluation at the same time.

“LOOK AT YOUR BODY:” THE ‘PAR’ AS POETIC-ACTION RESEARCH

At the end of 1998, the Amazonas Department Fondo Mixto, an entity belonging to the National Culture System of Colombia, announced a call for research proposals on the theme “Histories of daily life”. In a region of precarious jobs, the announcement of a grant never goes unnoticed, and it activates rumors and news that trigger oblique nets of alliances and antagonisms. At that time, I was doing research on development institutions in the town of Leticia so I didn’t pay much attention to the call. But one day, a friend who collaborated, as I did, with the Nimaira Naimeki Ibiri⁴ community incidentally told me that the community’s leaders were looking for a partner to help them conceptualize and write a proposal for the Fondo Mixto: “I hope you don’t mind if I suggested your name.” At the very same time, he told the leaders that I was considering applying to the grant with them, so our talks began to converge, kind of clumsily, on the theme “histories of everyday life.” When we finally found out that our mutual friend had set us up, we were so involved in the conversation that we couldn’t but write the proposal together. The decision was formalized with *mambe* and *ambil*⁵ specially prepared for the occasion, and the proposal was named: “Histories of daily life in the indigenous community Nimaira Naimeki Ibiri - Muina Murui (Kilómetro 11) in relation to interculturality.” More *mambe* and *ambil* were prepared with the intention of catching this modern prey⁶, something that proved effective as the prey fell into the trap and we won the grant.

The project was shaped by several events that took place in the *resguardo*⁷ during the previous months. In 1996, the Uitoto Muina chief of the Nimaira Naimeki Ibiri *maloca*⁸, who was later to become a member of the research team, came to the conclusions that one of the causes of the problems affecting the *resguardo* communities—social conflict, violence, addiction, alcoholism, poverty, and so on—was to have settled in a Tikuna⁹ territory without asking for permission to its spiritual

⁴ The yard of the sweet science’, also known as Kilómetro 11 community.

⁵ *Mambe* is a fine powder made of toasted, pounded and sieved coca leaves mixed with the ashes of *Cecropia* leaves. *Ambil* is a tobacco concoction to which vegetable salt and other ingredients may be added. *Mambe* and *ambil* refer to divine creative power of speech, and thought, respectively.

⁶ Project money is, in fact, envisioned as a pray that must be ensnared with the spiritual power of *mambe* and *ambil* (Micarelli, “Divine Banknote”).

⁷ In Colombia, indigenous *resguardos* are legal sociopolitical institutions governed by a special autonomous statute and implying inalienable and collective property titles over the territory.

⁸ *Maloca* is great communal house, traditionally inhabited by a patrilineage, and nowadays more commonly used to host dance rituals, communal meetings, and nightly ritual speech.

⁹ The Tikuna (*Magüta*) include about 30,000 individuals living in Brazil, Peru, and Colombia. Their traditional territory spans the northern shore of the Amazon River and its tributaries.



masters.¹⁰ To befriend the Tikuna spirits and “cure the territory” the chief decided to hold a dance ritual convening not only the *resguardo* communities, but also the representatives of the Tikuna people around the region. This strategy was consistent with the effort to restore a ritual order for managing interethnic relations in, and with, a fairly new territory.

That same year, putting into operation the USA-backed war on drugs, the Colombian army started to break into the *resguardo* to eradicate coca crops traditionally used by indigenous residents, a fact that they rightly perceived as a violation of their constitutional rights. To respond to the stigma associated to the coca plant, the people of the *resguardo* deployed a strategy that clung to coca as a sacred substance, a remedy, a symbol of resilience, and as the “principle of organization” from which to claim rights and autonomy against imposed visions of development and citizenship (Micarelli, *Indigenous Networks*).¹¹

Another important event was the election, in 1998, of the progressive Arcesio Murillo as governor of the Amazonas Department. His program, called Agenda 21, aimed to implement the resolutions of the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development (1992) with an emphasis on citizen participation and sustainable development. For the first time ever, the Amazonas Department’s development plan was based on broad consultations with the different sectors of civil society, and it incorporated the plans that each sector had produced.¹² These circumstances prompted intense discussions in indigenous communities toward the definition of their own development plans, called Plans of Life, a right established by the Colombian Constitution of 1991.

In a setting where longstanding forms of oppression and new opportunities mismatched, the project presented to the Fondo Mixto was meant to gain a deeper understanding of the problems affecting the community, and to propose solutions. The project’s main objective was to analyze intercultural relations through the history of the settlement, in which ethnic diversity was the disorderly result of various waves of displacement and relocation in a new territory (Micarelli, *Indigenous Networks*). According to indigenous researchers, historical analysis was required for crafting an actualized vision of indigenous society within enlarged interethnic interactions, so as to

¹⁰ Different waves of displacement were caused by the rubber boom during the first half of the 20th century, and more recently by drug trafficking, armed conflict, and extractivism. Additionally, people relocate in the *resguardos* close to the town of Leticia in search for education and health services.

¹¹ Indigenous people have been historically involved in each of the Amazonian extractive bonanzas, attracted by the promise of gains, paid the first time, and then trapped in vicious circles of debt peonage. During the 1980s, until the early 1990s, the *resguardo* provided cheap labor for cocaine processing. Men and women were flown to remote jungle areas hundreds of kilometers from Leticia, where they worked for a few months in cocaine processing camps and then sent back home, oftentimes penniless. The cocaine business had major consequences for the indigenous peoples of the region, not only violence, exploitation, prostitution, and illegality, but also addiction, which was overcome precisely through the sacralization of coca (*mambe*) cultural use.

¹² The Murillo government had to face enormous opposition from its adversaries, mostly landowners, businessmen, and politicians who often operate outside the law. Using any possible means, including threats, Murillo’s adversaries eventually forced him out of office by the end of 1999.



strengthen the capacity to organize and make decisions in the face of state policies, particularly those related to multiculturalism, decentralization, and development. The team understood interculturality in a two-fold sense: as internal differences that may be rearranged through the reconfiguration of cultural meanings (of coca and tobacco, myths and rituals, practical activities, and forms of organization); and as the thorny encounter with state-imposed view of development, citizenship, participation, and so on. Development, in particular, was the epitome of a long line of colonial practices and representations. The leaders' critique of development implied asking how development was introduced in the community, how it regulated daily life, why it failed, how it affected cultural identity and subjectivity, ending up locating indigenous people at the margins of national society. Contrary to what it claimed, it was clear that development had neither promoted participation, nor improved the quality of life of indigenous communities. What's more, the imposition of a foreign vision of development was rightly deemed by indigenous people to hinder self-government and self-determination. "This is the problem of speaking two languages," said a Muina researcher; "when we use one, we forget the other." One of the main questions raised by the project was how to mediate between 'our own' ("lo propio") and 'the foreign' ("lo ajeno"), an issue that was incorporated in project activities through a comparison of institutional and indigenous understandings of such concepts as leadership, family, community, territory, and the economy. Moreover, the creation of multilayered maps allowed people to visualize social and territorial assets and their relationships. This information was not only fed into the design of the Plan of Territorial Ordering (POT) and the Plan of Life, but it was also incorporated into the school curriculum. According to the leaders, in fact, a decontextualized education such as the one implemented in the community by the State was unable to contribute to wellbeing because it discredited the knowledge and practices that are needed to maintain healthy relationships among people and with the territory.

The research team consisted of two elders and two young leaders, fathers and sons, who belonged to two different lineages of the Uitoto's Muina and Murui subgroups respectively. This arrangement responded to another objective of the project, namely, to identify the prerogatives of the community's clans and lineages, an issue that the team deemed crucial for implementing forms of self-government. Among the People of the Center, clans and lineages own specialized knowledge and have exclusive rights and duties. Researchers were well aware that this clan-based system of organization clashes with the forms of leadership and administration based on vote introduced by the State. As an elder said: "How can I follow the community governor, and the authority of my Murui lineage at the same time?" In the multiethnic communities resulting from the rubber boom genocide and diaspora, and from state policies, such tension becomes even more thorny. Development projects, channeled through state institutions and aimed at an imaginary undifferentiated community, completely ignore indigenous kin-based systems of organization, thus they not only fail, but also turn into a source of conflict. The methodological strategy put in place by the team show how tricky it is to see the 'indigenous community' as a neat entity that can be accessed through consultations with local government officials.



One of the requirements of the Fondo Mixto was that the grant recipients hire an auditor. The auditor mediates between the grant recipient and the institution, making sure that the project meets the set objectives and deadlines, and periodically producing recommendations on which the next payments depend. In the Amazonas Department, one of the most corrupted of Colombia, this figure is obviously conducive to bribery.¹³ To avoid such scenario and have a better chance of completing the investigation on their own terms, the team proposed to hire me as auditor, and I accepted.

In order to accomplish my assigned tasks, I had to schedule periodical meetings with the team. At that point, something began to happen systematically. After scheduling a meeting, the team did not show up, or arrived hours later, or earlier, or even another day. We had a relationship of friendship and trust and in other occasions we always met at the agreed time with no problem. But with project meetings things were different. When I tried raising questions related to the project during our informal encounters, they objected that it was not the right time or place to talk about it: everything had to be fixed in advance, and coca and tobacco specially made for the occasion. So, I tried to follow a more formal procedure. I visited them in the *maloca* the night before the meeting with a gift of tobacco¹⁴, reminding them of the issues we had to discuss the next day. I even sent them invitation letters with a copy of receipt. Nothing worked! Trying to figuring out what was going on, I started suspecting that the leaders' elusion was a sort of declaration of independence against the control of time exerted by the funding institution that, in a way, I represented. Around that time, I came to realize that for the People of the Center the topics and types of speech go along with specific time-spaces. Night and day mark the contrast between native speech philosophies, and institutional discourse. For the People of the Center, the proper time-space to discuss important issues is late at night in the *maloca*, "when the pestle is silent" (that is, it has stopped pounding coca leaves), and everything is quiet. The nightly *mambeadero* speech-acts analyze daily events in order to 'cure' them, and have the power to shape and influence future occurrences, so they are uttered carefully. This is even more so because:

The origin of the history of the community is a delicate issue. [...] It is a source of conflicts. There is competition between clans, because there are clans that maintain knowledge, and clans that do not. There are things that cannot be named, such as Moniya Amena¹⁵, which, in fact, is now changing its name. (Quote from fieldnotes)

¹³ The mechanism is the following: a corrupt official selects the auditor among his friends, the auditor produces a negative evaluation that puts a stop to the disbursements, and the diverted funds are split among the accomplices.

¹⁴ Tobacco is offered in exchange for teaching or information, or as an invitation to dance ritual (see Micarelli, "Divine Banknote").

¹⁵ Moniya Amena is the indigenous Kilómetro 9 community, whose name refers to the tree of abundance of the Uitoto (Muina-Murui) mythology, a name that was considered too dangerous for its association with the powerful domain of myth. For this reason, the community adopted the name Manaide Izuru ('cold channel'), but switched back to Moniya Amena in recent times.



Rather than being negotiable, timetables became a field of dispute between different temporalities, agencies, and ways of organizing. By escaping them, the team tried to assert its autonomy with respect to a set of implicit assumptions of the temporality of Western modernity and development. By resisting the alien control of time and space, they were metonymically negating the whole world of development, and its power to shape alternative perceptions, practices, and subjectivities.

Another important issue that the research process revealed was the meaning of 'work', and its place in indigenous epistemologies. From the People of the Center's perspective, one they share with other native Amazonian societies, work is the source from which not only the human body, identity, and society, but also life and the cosmos are continuously recreated (Griffiths; Micarelli, "Divine Banknote"). Work materializes intentional thought and speech, encompassing such diverse practices as shamanism, teaching-learning, and healing besides productive activities. The People of the Center do not speak of research, but of work: "I don't do research! I work!" a woman replied emphatically when I inquired about her 'research' on ritual songs. Another elderly woman, showing me her calloused hands and slapping her head, legs, and knees, stated: "Look! I have much, much knowledge!" Knowledge is "to feel it and live it." It is not merely embodied; it is the body's very substance. These views go beyond issues of embodiment or body knowledge, by entailing a consideration of how knowledge and knowledge-mediated substances literally make and connect our bodies (Viveiros de Castro, "A fabricação do corpo"; Santos-Granero).

The People of the Center say that the human body is the shadow of the ancestors and of future generations. Past and future worlds reflect in it. The human body bears the sensuous traces of generations, of overlooked diseases, and of potentialities to unravel; diseases become epidemics, and potentialities get lost unless intentional thought, speech, and work harness and steer them towards widespread well-being. It is telling, in this regard, that at a certain point of the research process the elders decided to name the project anew. The new name was *o abimo erokai*, "look at your body", an allusion to a myth of the People of the Center in which the Creator, in the process of materializing himself out of nothingness, looks at his body and realizes he is a human person. This act of speech established the project as a progressive task of self-recognition and self-making from which healing and abundance will emerge. To heal the body is the first step to heal history as well. Past and future only appear as blurred images reflected in the human body, and it is through intentional agency that they acquire a tangible form. So, the humanized body is not just the reflected image of history, but it reflects back into history.

One could say that the indigenous research method employed PAR, yet not in the sense of Participatory Action Research, but of Poetic Action Research, since it recreated identity at the same time as it investigated it. The team would agree that identity is dialectically refashioned each day (and night), "triggered by disjunctions in social and environmental interactions" (White 1). Such process, both deeply historical, and revealing of a particular sense of history—historicity—, is located at the disjunction between presence and absence. Presence may lose its grip, one can feel dislocated and unable to act, resolving to moor in the past or to be thrown into a future hard to



imagine. Absence, on the other hand, is made present through memory and imagination. The People of the Center's principle of responsible science—"think well, speak well, work well, and turn it into abundance for all"—sits at this disjunction, and it strives to make visible what does not yet exist. At the same time, it guides the People of the Center in evaluating, resisting, and transforming foreign knowledge regimes, such as those imposed by the development apparatus of technical and bureaucratic knowledge. In so doing, native ways of thinking and doing managed to slip into the foreign genre of 'the research project', and appropriated it. The project became the arena for affirming perceptions of time, agency, knowledge, and work/research alternative to those driven by Western modernity. The People of the Center would agree with Maturana and Varela (26) that the knowledge of knowledge compels, and that "all doing is knowing, all knowing is doing [...] This circularity [...] this inseparability between a particular way of being and how the world appears to us, tells us that every act of knowing brings forth a world".

CHILI SMOKE AND WATER OF COOL HERBS: DOING RESEARCH IN AN ENCHANTED WORLD

The second project was initiated by a Muinane (Féeneminaa) man, Célino Nejedeka Jifichíu, a health promoter trained in both indigenous and western medical systems.¹⁶ When I first met him, he had just arrived from the Caquetá region after working for several years in indigenous communities as health promoter for the Amazonas Health Secretary. During his work, Célino could observe the inefficiency of institutional health programs, and the general decline of health in indigenous territories. For him, the causes of this situation were both "external" and "internal", including the institution's poor understanding of indigenous health systems, the consequent exclusion of cultural knowledge and practices in the training of promoters, the lack of articulation, or even the incompatibility, between indigenous and western health promotion activities and epidemiological calendars, the rivalry between local and institutional experts, and the decline of traditional health education among the new indigenous generations. Célino's experience and dual training provided him with the intercultural knowledge needed to respond to this situation. He began to cultivate the idea of a research project aimed at integrating indigenous preventive medicine into institutional training for health promoters, and, at the same time, at strengthening health education in indigenous communities. A few months after we met, Célino paid me a visit and asked me if I was willing to help him write a proposal for the Amazonas Health Secretary, which I gladly accepted. For about one year, we worked to summarize the complexities of the People of the Center's system of health and illness into the research proposal.¹⁷

¹⁶ All sentences in quotation marks in this section, except when followed by a bibliographic reference, are Célino Nejedeka's personal communications.

¹⁷ In the year 2000 the proposal was submitted to the Amazonas Health Secretary and the project was funded. Célino spent the next two years researching traditional health knowledge with Muinane and



Célimo always emphasized that the information he was passing on to me was just superficial (“encimita no más”), making clear that I could not consider myself his apprentice. This because knowledge is transmitted through genealogical lines, and learning is a lifelong commitment during which the apprentice has to comply with a strict regime of dieting, self-discipline and self-isolation. Any deviation puts the apprentice, the teacher, and their kin in danger, so excluding me from formal learning was a way to protect both of us, and our relatives, from the inherent danger of knowledge. A person who has no knowledge of the spiritual world “only feeds on material things, and follows a material path, without any commitment.” As soon as a person starts learning about the spiritual world, s/he uncovers the power contained in that world, and s/he becomes its target. For its cosmogonic origin, knowledge is considered to be “hot” and a potential source of illness. From the moment knowledge is “uncovered,” it must be properly “cooled down.” Both the teacher and the apprentice share the responsibility to constantly guard against evil—diseases, conflicts, anger, madness—and to shield the pathways along which evil arrives.

Célimo and I worked mostly at night, “when the heat and hustle of the day diminish and the world is cool and calm.” Nevertheless, “evil never sleeps;” the search for knowledge is riddled with obstacles: laziness, negligence, anger, inadequate defenses, twisted thinking, reckless speech, wrong behavior. The most threatening enemy of all is “the pressure of the world,” the dark side of knowledge: the greed for personal power. Notions of agency and responsibility permeate the People of the Center’s vision of knowledge. Just like Vine Deloria Jr. (1999) and Lee Hester (in Hester and Cheney 2001) show with regard to native North Americans, indigenous Amazonians too do not treat knowledge as a type of belief that can be true or false, but rather as a map that guides action. True knowledge is not defined in abstract terms, but from its tangible effects on the world. True knowledge brings forth widespread good health, while false knowledge, aimed at accumulating personal power over others, is announced by discomfort, malaise, the whimper of children during sleep, and other ominous signs. Accumulation (of power or goods) unbalances the flow of vital energy, thus becoming a source of misfortune (Micarelli, “Divine Banknote”).

Before starting to work on the proposal, Célimo decided that I needed a cleansing treatment. He conjured chili pepper, sticks of *palo fósforo*¹⁸, and *ambil*¹⁹ that he had prepared for the occasion, and tobacco and copal that he sent me to buy at a shop of esoteric goods run by an Inga couple at the river port. *Ambil* has potent emetic and purgative effects, and the smoke of chili pepper and *palo fósforo* causes profuse sinus secretions, indeed giving the feeling of a clearer mind. Célimo insisted on the need to bathe after work in order to cool the heat produced by thinking, because thinking, like

other People of the Center elders, and to compile the results into a one-hundred pages manuscript. In 2018, thanks to the support of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Célimo worked with his father Aniceto and his brothers to revise the text and produce a set of illustrations. In 2019, the book was finally published in open access with Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and 300 copies distributed among indigenous communities and organizations of Amazonia.

¹⁸ A kind of wood used to start a fire.

¹⁹ A concoction of tobacco mixed with vegetable salt and other additives.



any work, produces dirt that must be washed away lest it turns into illness. When it is not possible to take a bath, cool water should be applied to the forehead, the ears, and the back of the head, where, according to Célimo, memories are stored. Célimo also placed particular emphasis on diet, meaning to avoid certain foods and to reduce food intake in general, but also to abstain from anger, gossip, and laziness, work with enthusiasm, and keep a cheerful and positive mood.

Regulatory bodily practices such as induced vomiting, cleansing with aromatic herbs, inhaling the smoke of plants, dieting, abstaining from sleep, movement, speech, and sexual intercourse are instances of the particular attention paid to the material qualities of the body and the senses in teaching and learning. Bodily discipline is meant to “educate the body” and “clear the mind” at the same time. To educate the body does not mean to repress it so that the mind can roam freely, but to tune perception and introspection. To sit in a straight and still position for hours, in almost complete darkness, is suggestive of a body-mind technique meant to bring forth full mind-body consciousness (Varela et al. 23). An educated body is a body fully aware of its material and immaterial components: a “physical-spiritual body,” as Célimo put it, capable of achieving a conscious connection with the world. This discipline is a “preventive medicine, because it doesn’t let evil in;” at the same time, it sharpens the senses and makes them able “to detect illness from afar.”

Knowledge of preventive health involves the ability to read elusive signals in the body and the environment in order to identify the causative agent of illness. Célimo compared this information to the flow of messages on an electronic billboard. Messages are both external and internal, physical and psychological; “everything in the world speaks:” animal sounds, smells, mood, atmospheric and climatic changes, dreams and discomforts are vehicles of information. Oftentimes, signs combine to create complex sensory images:

When at sunset
The light turns yellow-green
And the animals are still
And it drizzles
This is a delicate sign

Such information immediately triggers actions of prevention and promotion. The repetition of formulas that address physical and psychological states, such as “cooling,” “relieving,” “being surrounded by the breath of life that disperses tiredness, worry, anger, and that makes everything cool and calm,” activates synesthetic integration and imagery to bring forth a calm bodymind. Speech also turns healing into a fundamentally social activity. Célimo reminds how he began to sit with his father as it saddened him to see him sitting alone, with no one to listen and respond to him. Even when an elder speaks alone, it is not a soliloquy, but a dialogue with other beings on a spiritual level. In fact, healing is not a solitary task; it unfolds through dialogue among present persons, the ancestors, and other-than-human beings. In general, a healthy life cannot be achieved but through the skillful correspondence with difference. Through speech,



which is itself a medicine, healing spreads from the individual body to the social and cosmic body, linking personal agency to generalized well-being.

During my collaboration with the People of the Center, I had to familiarize myself with a set of tacit rules that govern the acquisition and transmission of knowledge: as Célimo put it, I had to learn how to learn. Given that for the People of the Center all knowledge already existed from the beginnings of time, people do not construct knowledge anew, but they uncover it through a personal search that is at once a process of self-discovery and self-making. Accordingly, knowledge transmission is typically non-intrusive, and it deliberately avoids direct didactic explanations. However, knowledge transmission is far from being unorganized. Support for learning is meticulously arranged, and it employs sophisticated pedagogical strategies that promote the apprentice's heuristics, alertness, and capacity for introspection (Micarelli, "Taste of Knowledge"). Learning is always attentive to the empirical circumstances with which it dialogues, therefore it can occur unexpectedly. People enjoy the unpredictable nature of knowledge unfolding, and they advise the apprentice to always stay alert.

Different verbal strategies can be used according to the purpose at hand. Two friends of Muinane and Uitoto Murui ethnicity respectively, listed the following repertoire that I was able to confirm with other individuals:

1. Metaphor. It is used to say many things at once in an intentionally indirect way.
2. Advice (*consejo*). This is direct, it is easier to write it down, similarly to:
3. Orientation. This is a sweet word.
4. Song. How many things are said through songs! [Songs, for example, are used to reproach the hosts of a dance ritual. Competitions of mythological knowledge are also carried out through sung riddle duels].
5. *Manguaré* [drums].
6. Gestures. They have another function... [they comment with a gesture]
7. Spell (*conjura*). It is not spoken or sung; it is blown. You cannot write it because there are two paths crossing each other: good and evil. It is used to cure. It has power.
8. Written words. Just chitchat! Its function has not been established so it is put aside. It is useless for transmitting, reciprocating, or circulating knowledge. It betrays the norms of learning: what do I want to learn for? how do I return it? how do I defend it? The one who is going to pay is the teacher, and to store knowledge means to betray it: it is no longer useful.
9. Mythology. It is not from the past, but circular [they make a *mudra* by joining the thumb and index fingers in a circle]: from past, to present, to future. Word of Life, or rather, Word of Origin. It is the knowledge of the Grandfather of Tobacco. It has the Power of Life.
10. Legend or story. "It is said that ...", a speech transformed by people. It may have a mythological basis, but lost its power. When it mentions places, they no longer have power as they have in mythology.
11. Stories... stories of ancestors, what happened in the past. They have a moral function.

Then they added the following commentary:

During learning people do not speak. Orientation is more difficult; you have to learn how to admonish, yes, but with a sweet word. Don't you know what energy is transmitted through speech? Advice, on the other hand, is meant to raise doubts at once. But everything has its own time. Advice, for instance, has three phases: discussion, advice, and projection for work, otherwise something is missing, looking back it was not a good idea, it was not a word of life.



We say: "to put it in the land of dawn."²⁰ That's why we stay awake all night: to cool everything down.

But in spite of the People of the Center's obsession with classifications, classifications always tend to mutate, dodging any attempt at standardization. It seems that, as Maturana and Varela say (245), "[knowledge] compels us to adopt an attitude of permanent vigilance against the temptation of certainty." Meaning is simultaneously revealed and concealed, like the Cheshire cat leaving behind just the trace of a smile. This can be frustrating, as the following excerpt from my field diary shows.

[...] Tonight they started with "advice." They came to interrogate me. But about what? They did not say.

They say that dialogue must have a theme, an unasked question, otherwise thought gets confused.

"Stay still. Do not bother with mosquitoes. Do not move. Not even if you have to pee or if your body hurts. If you move, you don't let me listen to the Creator [...]."

– "How many levels there are?"

They are questioning me about "stages of a conversation." At least that's what I thought. I believed that the third level was "to put it in the land of dawn" (that is, "projection"), but I am wrong. I was almost certain, and I said it with confidence. They look at each other.

– "No!"

– "No?"

– "You're starting from the fifth."

The fifth? Weren't they three? From the fifth I am now moving backwards. Without even realizing it, I changed classification and direction. From the fifth level –watch out: that of "vulgarity!"– I move downward. That's right, the most important level is at the bottom, like a seated thinker:

5. Vulgarity

4. Diplomat

3. Apprentice leader

2. Mythology by stories

1. Mythology by origins

But this is another path. They crisscrossed like the fibers of a basket. Thought that is not retained, slips away.

For the People of the Center, the one who knows never says "I know." Knowledge is dissimulated for reasons that go beyond modesty, such as the danger of becoming the target of malignant spiritual agents, or the power of knowledge to produce tangible effects, but, most of all, for the value attributed to lateral or divergent thinking and to heuristics. The basket imagery is used by the People of the Center to describe knowledge as an interwoven fabric. More than a metaphor, the basket imagery guides the performative action of knowledge, both creative and restricted, textured and relational, following a structured pattern, but, at the same time, always emergent.

Even though the interpretation of signs is oriented and even constructed by speech, it does not follow a logocentric model. Ochs and Capps (19) pointed out the role of narratives in shaping experience by imposing order and creating "a continuity

²⁰ To materialize knowledge through work, i.e. to make it visible and tangible.



between past, present and imagined worlds.” But other forms of communication that are integrated into the narrative, such as gesture, posture, silence, and even the sounds of animals, sidestep order and continuity, and it is precisely from such dissonance that meaning emerges, always open and expanding. A research method that privileges the collection of verbal utterance hinders the task of comprehending the experiences of the People of the Center and their own perception of the context, that, as Fabian (1995) reminds us of, is not given, but always produced. Alfredo Molano (101) describes the dissonance between data and the lived experience as follows: “For me, fieldwork was worth the many perspectives it opened up and the surprises it held, not the information collected. That, for the rest, once systematized, underlined once and again the difference with what in the backroom the interviewees let see and allow to feel.”

ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE BACKROOM

[Anthropology] is not so much a study of people and things as a way of thinking *with* them: a protracted master-class in which the novice learns to perceive things in the ways his or her mentors do [...] It is to join with people in their speculations about what life *might* or *could* be like, in ways nevertheless grounded in a profound understanding of what life *is* like in particular times and places. Yet the speculative ambition of anthropology has been persistently compromised by its commitment to an academic model of knowledge production according to which lessons learned through observation and practical participation, in what is called ‘the field’, are recast as empirical material for subsequent interpretation. In this recasting, field observations are normalised to conform to the expectations of the academic model. Lessons in life become qualitative data. Our mission is to refute the division between data gathering and theory building that underwrites normal science by re-establishing anthropology as an *art of inquiry*, dedicated not to the interpretation of what has already come to pass but to finding pathways along which life can be carried on. Here, every work is an experiment: in the sense not of testing a hypothesis but of prising an opening and following where it leads. (Ingold, “Knowing”)

What is the enchanted world? I would venture to say that the enchanted world is a world that exceeds and resists the disenchantment of the world. It exceeds it because it goes beyond an understanding of the world framed by the separation between object and subject, mind and matter, nature and society, the visible and the invisible. It resists it because it refuses to become a quantifiable and controllable object. Upon entering the enchanted world, the authority of academic knowledge is automatically revoked. As soon as we recognize its existence, we become aware that knowledge is never definitive and we are left with the knowledge that one can “live and feel,” as the Murui woman quoted above put it. This compels us to take responsibility towards the world that the act of knowing produces or could produce.

By stressing the inseparability of knowing and doing, indigenous methodologies offer vital lessons for expanding the possibilities of anthropology to understand the world, and to respond adequately to the challenges that the world present us with. Lessons in life proliferate unpredictably; still, I track some pathways that I find particularly meaningful. First, indigenous research methodologies shun the application



of a predetermined set of procedures, fostering instead a relational and heuristic approach to inquiry. Putting learning at the core of inquiry, they all the more stress the process of 'learning to learn'. But when ethnography is reduced to the description and explanation of the culture of others, the possibilities of learning diminish, and with it any prospect of a real decolonization of Western science. This proposition demands a generous opening to other modes of knowing, displacing academic research from its central omniscient point of view towards what we may call peripheral learning (Lave and Wenger).

The second lesson is the central place given to the relationship between knowledge and health. For indigenous people, real knowledge brings forth good health, meaning not only the absence of illness, but a state of generalized tranquility, vitality, and abundance. The effects of knowledge, first perceived in the human body (the physical-spiritual body, as Célino Nejedeka has it) spread through the fabric of life that connects the body to the world. More than that, the flesh of the human body and the flesh of the world are one and the same. Maintaining such interconnectedness in balance is what makes a healthy life possible (perhaps the greatest lesson the COVID-19 pandemic is teaching us). Yet today both the body and the world are being subjected to aggressive forms of extractivism to fuel productivity and the growth of a system that eats itself to death. While we must conform to an academic industry more and more alienated from real life, where knowledge is evaluated by indicators of productivity and impact factors, it is not a minor issue to remind us that knowing brings forth a world.

This leads us to the last lesson, namely, the inseparability of epistemological, ethical, and political dimensions of research. If it is clear that the way we know enables or limits understanding, its implications are not just epistemological, but also ethical and political: knowledge is never neutral. This realization bumps against the benchmark of the academic standards of rigor, validity, reliability, and reproducibility, which cast upon emergent experience like a straitjacket preclude the possibility to follow along where others lead us, and to join with them in their pursuits and imaginations. By imposing academic standards on the modes of knowing of others, the other "vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being" (Santos 45). Such exclusion is absolutely unethical, notwithstanding ethical requirements of do no harm or informed consent forms, and its political repercussions are self-evident.

I would like to see anthropological inquiry through Muinane's eyes as an attentive walking through winding and sometimes fortuitous paths along which initial plans are likely to be subverted. Frustrations and setbacks are the opportunity to embrace other ways of understanding life and living it, but more often they just become the material for musing about our analytical tools and our power to represent others, a respectable task when it does not reproduce the asymmetry between a subject who studies and an object who is studied underwritten by the academic model. Breaking this asymmetry means to fully recognize that inquiry cannot be disconnected from, or be immune to, the ways knowledge is produced and validated by the people with whom we work. In order to decolonize itself and be able to contribute to social transformation, ethnographic inquiry must go beyond reporting on other people's beliefs and



behaviors, and humbly undertake an education in their methodologies. Only then may “the co-imagining of possible futures” (Ingold, “Ethnography” 392) unravel.

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