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Being a Real Man:¹ In Memory of Grompes

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On August 16, 1999 I received an e-mail message informing me of the death of Grompes, headman of Balta from 1960 to 1999. I cannot begin to express the sense of loss I experienced. It was as if a major chapter of my life had ended, one that began on July 18, 1955 when I arrived in the Cashinahua village of Maneya on the Curanja River of southeastern Peru. As a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators, my goal was to learn their language and to translate the New Testament. Over the years, my perspectives and goals changed (Kensinger 1997), in no small part due to my interactions with Grompes. In this essay I want to share some of my memories of him and reflect on some of the changes that he and his fellow Cashinahua experienced as a result of increasing contact with the outside world during his lifetime.²

When I began my fieldwork with the Cashinahua in 1955, Grompes became my mentor. He was about my age, perhaps a few years younger (Montag, the SIL missionary, assigned him the birth date of August 14, 1935 when he helped him get the registration and national identity papers he needed at the time he was appointed promoter of public health in the late 1970s). In 1955 he had two wives and an infant daughter. As with all the other Cashinahua, he had an extremely limited vocabulary in Spanish. His contacts with the outside world had been restricted to his interactions with the Peruvian traders who sporadically visited his village since the mid- to late 1940s, and to whom all the Cashinahua males were hopelessly indebted. He never worked as my linguistic informant, for he did not have the patience to sit for hours repeating words and phrases while I struggled to learn the language. Rather, he took me into the forest, taught me how to track animals and shoot them, and how to make baskets out of palm fronds in order to carry our catch back to the village, including the bark straps for suspending the baskets from our shoulders and head. He also taught me how to make a new garden, to identify when plants were mature and how to harvest them. He organized the team of men who helped me build my house. It was Grompes, along with his father, the headman Pudichu, who chided me when I acted in ways deemed

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inappropriate by the community and taught me how a real man was supposed to behave. When his father began to address me as son, we became brothers.

Memory 1

Grompes and I had been hunting for several hours. I shot two spider monkeys and a wild turkey. As we were walking in the bed of a small stream, a fish swam through the shallow water towards us and into a deeper pool at a bend in the stream. Grompes decided he wanted to catch it for one of his lovers. He peered into the pool, pulling some of the branches out of the way in order to locate it. As he withdrew his arm from the thicket a coral snake struck, barely missing his hand, and landed in the streambed. Without thinking, I pulled up my rifle and shot it. My knees were shaking so badly I had to sit down. I knew that if he had been bitten, it would probably have been fatal. I also knew that I had not paid attention to where we had been hunting and would not have been able to get back to the village by myself to get help. Grompes' knees were also shaking, but not for the same reason. When I shot the snake, I allowed its spirit to escape, a spirit that could return to the village to avenge itself by causing illness and even death to its killer or a close kinsman. Infants were particularly vulnerable, and Grompes had a newborn daughter. He informed me that we would have to undergo a month-long fast followed by a purification ritual to lessen the chances of the spirit's revenge.

That evening when the men gathered to eat, Grompes did not eat any meat. He ate only some boiled green plantains and manioc. I ignored the taboo and ate meat. Grompes scolded me, as did others. After that, I only ate what he did when I joined them for the communal meals, but in the privacy of my house I continued to eat meat. After all, it was just one of their superstitions and I was there to help to free them from their fear of spirits. During the following week, Grompes' daughter began to run a fever and I was subjected to shunning by the entire community. For the rest of the month, I ate only what Grompes gave me to eat. One morning, he called me and told me it was time for the purification ritual. We went to a sandbar along the river just below the village, accompanied by his father, his father-in-law, and several other men. His father brought a small clay bowl with some hot coals from the kitchen fire. His father-in-law brought a small leaf packet containing several bamboo bladelets, the tips of which were coated with the excretion from the glands on the back of a *campun* toad. Grompes and I were instructed to sit on the ground. His father placed a hot coal on the underside of my wrist just long enough to

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cause a blister to form. He broke the blister and rubbed the toad sap over the open lesion. Grompes' father-in-law provided him with the same treatment. Within minutes, we were writhing on the ground, vomiting, defecating, and urinating, with copious mucus coming from our noses. It took about ten minutes before consciousness returned. They helped us get up from the ground and into the river. While we washed our bodies, several men cleaned our excreta off the sandbar. We returned to the village cleansed, both internally and externally.

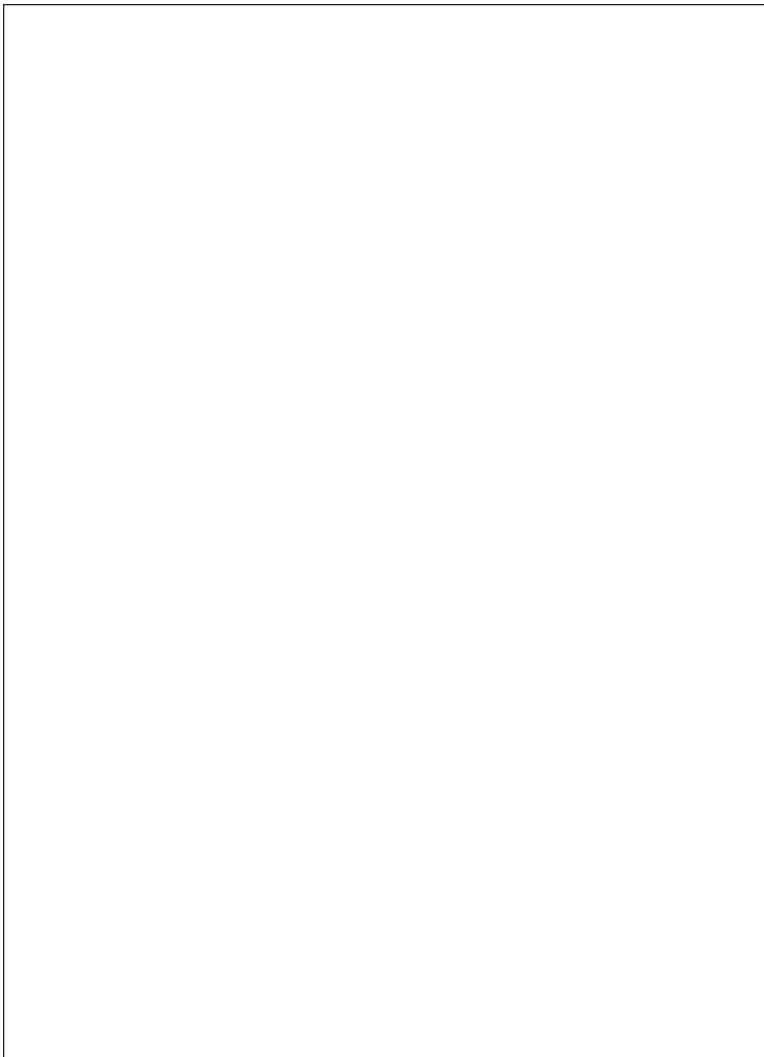


Figure 1. Grompes, 1957

Memory 2

“I can’t do it,” he said, as he flopped in the hammock hanging near my desk. “My wives want me to marry her. I already have three wives to provide for and they want me to add another one so that their work group isn’t broken up.” He was referring to Natalia, whose husband Atahualpa died five days earlier. Natalia, Atahualpa, and Atahualpa’s two sons by Grompes’ late sister lived in the same house as Grompes, his wives and four children along with Grompes’ mother and father and his teenaged sister. Following the death of both of her parents in an epidemic in the late 1940s, Grompes’ parents had adopted Natalia, and Atahualpa married her following the death of his wife, Grompes’ sister. Over the years Natalia had worked closely with Grompes’ wives, who feared that she would remarry and move out of the household. So, they urged Grompes to make her his fourth wife.

“I already have to make three hilltop gardens and three sandbar peanut gardens each year, one for each wife. And they are always complaining that I do not bring them enough meat. Each one wants her own share of game as if she were my only wife. I can’t do it. I won’t do it.”

Several weeks later I noticed that Natalia’s hammock and mosquito net had been moved and now hung next to those of his other wives. When Grompes next came to my house, I said, “Brother, it looks like you have added another wife.”

“What could I do?” he responded, “they refused to give me any food. They wouldn’t talk to me. They wouldn’t have sex with me. They acted as if I didn’t exist. So I married her.” As he turned to walk away, he gave me a big grin and added, “She really likes sex.”

Memory 3

Grompes groaned as he listened to his son Pancho yelling orders to the group of men gathered to clear the weeds and brush from an area where the new secondary school was to be constructed by a crew of Peruvian workers from the Ministry of Education office in Esperanza. “Will he never learn? That’s not the way a headman gets men to work. He has spent too much time with the outsiders. Look! He is ordering the men just like the *comandante* in Esperanza. Real men do not respond well to being ordered about like dogs. You have to tickle them with your words, not hit them between the shoulder blades. Aw, well, maybe he will learn.”

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As we turned to walk back to the clinic, he said to me, "It is hard to be a good headman."

Several weeks earlier he made the same statement to me when I inquired about why his sister's son Chima had moved away from Balta. "It was the pigs," he said. Chima decided to raise pigs to sell to the Peruvians in Esperanza. The cash from these sales would allow him to purchase goods for his growing family. He bought a boar and two sows and within three years he had more than thirty pigs, some of which he sold in Esperanza. He not only bought clothing for his wife and children, but shotgun shells and other goods that he generously shared with his kinsmen. Although people were happy with his generosity, they complained about the pig feces on the paths and around their houses, the wallows near or under their houses, and the manioc and plantains the pigs ate from the baskets they had stored on the ground near their hearths. They voiced their gripes openly in Chima's presence but never confronted him directly to demand that the pigs be removed from the village. As the pig herd multiplied and the complaints of the villagers increased, Grompes suggested to Chima that he erect a fence around a nearby abandoned garden and move the pigs out of the village. Chima refused. He knew that the suggested area would not provide sufficient food for the pigs and that he would have to supplement their diet out of his gardens, thus reducing the supply of vegetables available both for his family's consumption and for sale to outsiders. Grompes did nothing.

However, when a doctor from the public health service in Esperanza visited the village in May 1994, he informed Grompes that pig feces were the major source of the intestinal parasites that were plaguing the population, and thus constituted a public health hazard. He said it was a waste of his budget to continue to provide medicine to Grompes, who served as the public health promoter, so long as pigs remained in the village. Grompes, fearful that the doctor might decide not to provide any medicines for his use in the village clinic, ordered Chima in the doctor's presence to remove the pigs within a month or he would kill them. Several days later Chima moved the pigs to one of his old garden sites on the other side of the river and twenty minutes by canoe below the village. Within a month he built a new house at the site and moved his entire extended family, including his two married daughters and their husbands, out of Balta.

The villagers were happy to be rid of the pigs but they were not pleased with Grompes' tactics. Many thought that Grompes pandered to the outsider when he threatened to kill the pigs, behavior they considered unbecoming both for a real man, that is a Cashinahua, and for a real headman. The doctor, convinced that one source of the intestinal parasites

would be eliminated, continued to provide Grompes with medicines to dispense at the clinic.

“What could I do?” he asked me, “If I had not spoken forcefully, the doctor would have thought I was a weak leader who wouldn’t make sure his order to get rid of the pigs would be carried out. I couldn’t risk losing the medicines he provides. I thought Chima would understand. It’s hard to be a headman.”

Grompes paid a heavy price for his behavior in this case. Not only did Chima and his extended family leave Balta, so did other families, some of whom cited his treatment of Chima as an example of why they had become dissatisfied with Grompes’ leadership. Between April 1994 and July 1997 the population of Balta dropped from 284 to 125.

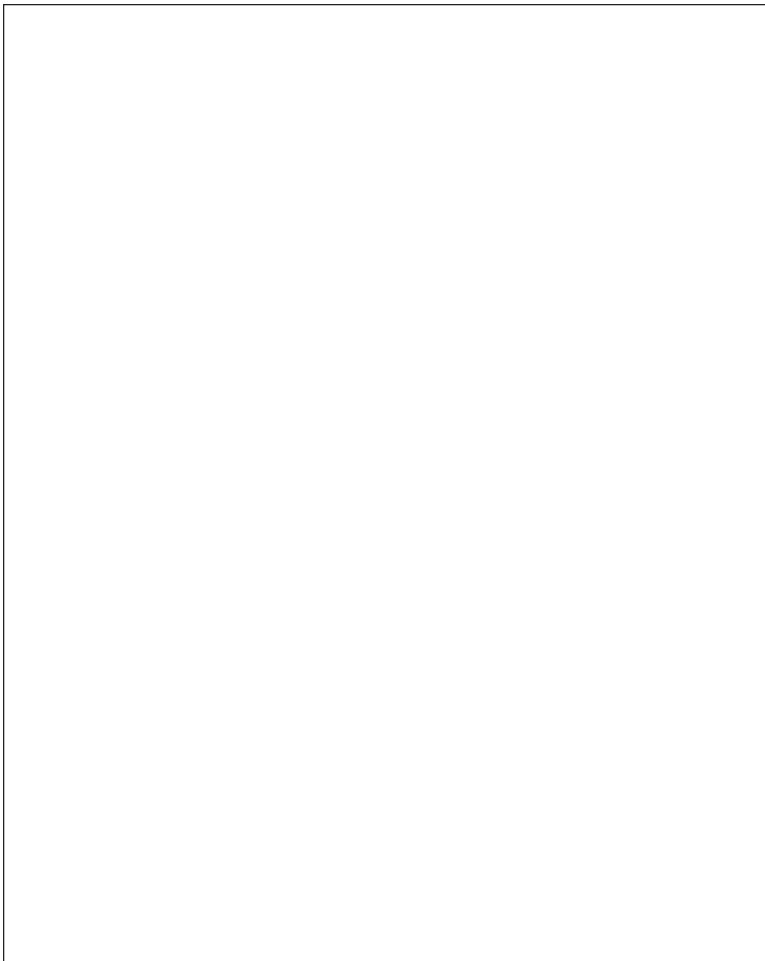


Figure 2. Grompes with his daughter and son, 1958

Memory 4

Grompes sighed deeply as he stretched out in his hammock, inviting me to occupy another hammock hanging next to his. We had just finished eating a relaxed meal. It had been a stressful day for him and it was clear that he wanted to talk about it. Around 8:30 that morning a group of outsiders, including a young Peruvian doctor from the Public Health Service in Puerto Esperanza, arrived in Balta. They had come upriver, stopping in each village to vaccinate all the children who had been born since the last vaccination campaign six years earlier. Grompes, as both headman and promoter of public health, sent several of his grandsons to inform mothers to bring their young children and led the doctor and his team to the clinic where they quickly got things set up and vaccinated twenty-four people. Before the doctor left to go upriver to Santa Rey, the last village on the Curanja, Grompes invited him to return to Balta for a meal before heading back to Esperanza, and he agreed.

Grompes then instructed his three wives to prepare a special meal and told one of his sons and his grandsons to prepare several baskets of smoked meats, manioc, and plantains as gifts for their Peruvian guests. They returned two hours later and were ushered to Grompes' house where they were served bowls of venison cooked with elbow macaroni, a stew made of caiman and grated green plantains, boiled manioc, and roasted ripe plantains. While the doctor was eating, Grompes casually asked him if he would be willing to examine several patients who were not responding to treatment for an infection he couldn't identify. The doctor agreed and, after they finished the meal, he accompanied Grompes to the clinic where he examined two teenage boys and a girl, all of whom had swollen glands in their groins and/or swollen genitalia. The doctor diagnosed the problem as *Linfogranuloma Venereo*, a sexually transmitted disease that he said was rampant in Esperanza. After making sure Grompes had an adequate supply of the appropriate antibiotic, he and his team left for Esperanza, loaded with eight large baskets of manioc and plantains and two of smoked meat. Grompes quickly rounded up 26 teenage boys (the youngest 13 and the oldest 17) and 7 girls (the oldest 16, the youngest 10) who exhibited the symptoms and began their antibiotic treatments. All but three of them were his grandchildren. As he doled out the medicine, he instructed them to refrain from sex or, if they continued to be sexually active, to limit their sexual contacts to those who were currently receiving treatment for the disease until they were free of symptoms. As the last of the teenagers left the clinic, Grompes turned to me and said with a giggle, "They are a horny

bunch, aren't they." To which I responded, "Just like their grandfather." As an aside, we discovered the source of the venereal infection two days later when one of the young male mestizo secondary school teachers came to the clinic to get treatment for painful swelling in his groin and penis. Several weeks earlier he had returned to Balta from Esperanza where he had gone to celebrate the Peruvian independence day.

As we sat in our hammocks, Grompes reviewed the day's activities, particularly the doctor's visit. While in the clinic, the doctor examined Grompes' medical records and made some suggestions about how he could make improvements, reminding him that some of the monthly reports he had submitted to the medical post in Esperanza had been inadequate, placing in jeopardy his continuing appointment as public health promoter. "Because I have trouble filling out the forms they demand, they don't think I have the appropriate education and am not qualified to provide medical treatment for my people," he said.

In fact, Grompes had no formal schooling other than his training to be a health care worker. He had learned how to read and write in literacy classes organized by SIL missionary Susan Montag when he was in his forties. He spoke some Spanish but, according to him, had difficulty following conversations in Spanish. In the mid-1970s, Dick Montag arranged for Grompes to go to the SIL base near Pucallpa to attend classes for indigenous public health promoters. Let me quote at some length from a text recorded and translated by Montag of Grompes' memories of his training:

Mistakenly thinking that everything was well and it would be easy to study medicine, I again went to Yarinacocha long ago. After I had gone again, Ricardo put me into the medical course. When he enrolled me, I entered thinking incorrectly that all was well. However, when they wrote there on the blackboard, I tried to learn but I went soft. I was writing very slowly in my notebook. I was very slow when the teacher asked who had finished. Those who had entered the course with me raised their hands; however, I did not want to raise my hand. The nurses said to me, "How goes it? OK, you are not a turtle. You must learn faster. A turtle is slow, but a person can learn quickly. We assume that you do not write very often."

I answered, "Even though I can write, I am not able to do the lesson."

One of them said, "Even though it is that way, do it." Three very beautiful women taught me long ago. One of them taught and another wrote on the blackboard, saying. "Do it like this." The symptoms that someone had and what to do for them, I did not write and learn. Again one of them said to me, "OK, ask [Ricardo]. He can tell you by means of your words."

That was good. I was happy. But then I came and entered his house and said, "Friend, they told me thusly today."

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He said, "Good. What?"

I asked, "What is this?"

[Ricardo] said, "I can't do it. It's yours. You learn it."

Again not being able to do that, I was suffering. Finally a very little bit crossed over to me. When that happened, I thought, "It's good."

Then the next day they gave me an exam on that which they had written out saying, "Write what you learned yesterday, what you learned about diarrhea and why someone hurts that way."

On the way to the house, I was thinking, "OK, I have tried to learn and it has not entered my head."

Then Ricardo said, "Friend, how goes it in class?"

I said, "How am I able to do it? This outsider told me to write out answers to this exam. Do it for me. I will copy it later."

But he said, "Don't do it that way. I will not do it for you. Learn it yourself."

I thought, "Oh my, what should I do now?" I did not sleep that night.

After not sleeping, I went to class in that condition and the nurse said, "Give us the take home exams now." The knowledgeable ones gave them their papers all around the room; however, I had not written on the paper they had given me. Then one of the nurses said, "This is bad. I have not taught you anything. Your friends (the Montags) are knowledgeable. They are the ones who must cause you to learn."

I again came to [Montag's] house and asked about the exam. [Susana] said, "You are not a bad student. To do it well, do not write long answers. Write each of these points. Write two words, that's all, and learn them at this time. When you have learned these completely, then you will be able to understand all of it."

Studying only that, looking at only those points, I did not sleep; with only eyes I stayed awake all night. The next morning [Susana] asked, "Did you sleep well last night?"

I lied, saying, "Yes, I fell asleep last night." Even though I did not sleep, I went to class and did the exam and finally pulled out a good mark.

One of the nurses said, "Wow, now you have done it. Good." Then she told my friends by telephone, "Your friend Grompes is now learning," and they sent me to my friends' house. When I entered, they asked, "Have you now learned?" I responded, "I have now learned something." They each said, "Good I am happy for you."

So with much suffering, I had finally gotten a little bit of their teaching. At first only Susana helped me by going to classes with me. Later Ricardo helped me. He went with me repeatedly each day to where they were teaching me. He sat with me and when I did not understand what the women were teaching and writing on the blackboard, he would whisper, "It is their word for *'chixu'* (diarrhea). Write it." By means of our words he repeatedly told me whatever I did not understand ... Also at his house in the evenings, we talked about whatever they taught us that day. We were learning by asking each

other as we spoke long ago.

At first he was continually teaching only me, and then a week or so later, I told Ricardo about my friend Lucho, a Machiguenga, who was suffering because there was not anyone to help him. Ricardo said, "Good. In order for me to teach him along with you, bring him tomorrow." And I brought him the next evening and I continually studied with Lucho long ago. Whenever we made a mistake, Ricardo corrected us, teaching by means of strong words; with much difficulty we learned the names of many various outsider medicines. I was studying so hard that my body became like it was feverish, my skin became hot and I thought, "I am not able to go in any direction. I am frustrated in escaping to anywhere, there is no trail ...". I was frustrated in telling [Ricardo] how I felt. I could not tell him; I thought he would hit me. I did not tell him. I really did not tell him. Being afraid of him, suffering a lot, I again pulled good marks; again I did not make mistakes on exams.

[Susana] said to me, "Good. Now it is good. Friend, did you pull a perfect twenty today?"

I answered, "Yes, they gave me a perfect mark of twenty today." She was very satisfied long ago.

After they finished teaching us at Yarinacocha, they took Lucho and me along with the knowledgeable ones to the government hospital in Pucallpa because we had pulled good marks. There they only asked us a little bit about patient medical forms and medicine inventory forms. Those who were there at the hospital gave me a small amount of money; it was 18,000 soles that they gave me.

Many years later I was able to contribute to Grompes' education. The house in which I lived in 1993 and 1994 was no longer habitable when I returned to the field in 1997, so Grompes insisted that I stay in the clinic building. It contained a bed I could sleep in, a desk I could work at, and a small room to store my things. On a daily basis, I was able to observe Grompes as he treated patients, struggled with his medical records, and trained two of his sons and two grandsons to serve as his successors. I often watched him leaf through the medical manual provided by the government searching for the information he needed to diagnose an illness or decide on the preferred treatment. One day I showed him how to use the index to find what he was looking for. We found it quickly. He turned to me, smiled and said, "Oh, that's what all those pages of names and numbers at the end of the book are for. Why didn't anybody tell me? Now I don't have to look throughout the book to find out what I need to know." After that he often sat at his desk and read aloud sections of the text or the list of items in the index, pausing to ask me for the meaning of specific terms. One day he asked, "What is *temperatura*?" I told him it meant how warm or cold something is. "No," he said, "That is *termometro*."

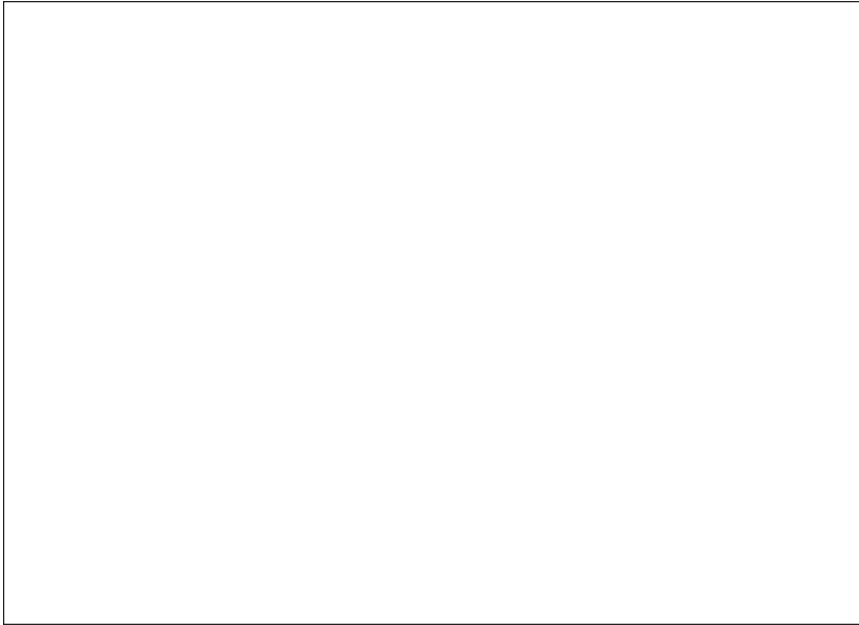


Figure 3. Grompes with daughter, 1957

“No,” I said, “‘*termometro*’ is what you use to measure ‘*temperatura*.’” “*Haaba*,” he replied, “Now I understand.”

Memory 5

Late in the afternoon of August 10, 1997, Grompes and I were sitting quietly in the clinic. The crowd of people who filled the room earlier had all returned to their houses. Grompes was working on the medical reports that he had to send to Esperanza. I was putting notes into my laptop. Grompes sighed deeply and pushed his chair away from his desk. “I’m getting too old for all of this. I’m anxious for Armando and Bernabe to take over the work here. I’ve taught them almost everything I know about medicine and they both have taken short courses with the doctors in Esperanza. Maybe when Armando finishes the course in December they will designate him public health promoter.”

He stood up, stretched, and started to pace back and forth. “What am I going to do with Pancho? He has already been designated headman but everybody expects me to keep doing the headman’s work.” He went to his

desk and pulled a paper out of one of the drawers and handed it to me to read. It was a very formal looking document with seals and signatures. Listed on it was the following:

Jefe de la Comunidad: Francisco Pudichu Perez [Pancho, Grompes' son by Maria]; Agente Municipal: Alberto Francisco Naita [husband of one of Grompes' daughters by Natalia]; Teniente Gobernador: Alberto Bardales Peso [husband of one of Grompes' daughters by Maria]; and Pastor de la Iglesia: Roberto Pudichu Perez [one of Grompes' son by Ana].³

"I want people to accept Pancho as the headman but they turn away from him and come to me because he orders them around the way Peruvians do. What can I do? He is stubborn like me and resists my advice just as I did with my father." "Well," I said, "You will just have to show him how a real headman behaves." We laughed together. Three days later Grompes had an opportunity to do just that.

Somebody stole a new pair of shoes recently purchased by one of the Peruvian mestizo secondary school teachers who angrily demanded that Grompes, as headman, find and punish the thief, and threatened to file a complaint with the police in Esperanza if the matter was not settled within the village. Since this was only the latest of a series of thefts within the village, Grompes called a community meeting at 7 a.m. the following morning. Most of the villagers attended, sitting or standing in three groups: the adult men to Grompes' right, the women and young children to his left, and the teenaged boys in front of him. The teacher stood behind Grompes throughout the proceedings. Grompes, switching between Spanish and Cashinahua, indicated that the purpose of the meeting was to deal with the accusation of theft. He demanded in Spanish that the person who stole the shoes return them and that anybody with information about the theft should tell him what they knew. He switched to Cashinahua to tell them that I, unlike the teacher, had not made a public issue about somebody stealing numerous goods and most of my money in the previous weeks, something most of the villagers knew about but not the mestizos. He then informed them in Spanish that theft under Peruvian law was punishable by a jail term and/or a fine. In Cashinahua he reminded them that theft was neither appropriate nor necessary because if somebody had something you needed or wanted, you simply had to ask for it as a gift or to borrow it. If they refused to give or loan it, they showed themselves to be selfish, a serious moral flaw. But to steal was equally wrong, he argued, because in doing so the thief was behaving like a coati or a rat, that is, in a manner less than human. He illustrated the point by telling a story in

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which a woman who persisted in stealing food was transformed into an animal. Grompes stressed that the teacher, as an outsider, did not know Cashinahua ways and expected him to respond to the theft as the chief in Esperanza would. In Spanish he informed them that if the shoes weren't returned and he found out who stole them he would either be forced to send the thief to Esperanza, if the teacher insisted, or outside authorities would be called in to deal with an internal matter. In Cashinahua he told them that because I knew how to respond to the theft like a real man I was not pressing him to find and punish the person or persons who stole my goods, but that I was distressed that they were becoming like the people in Esperanza where theft is rife, thus ceasing to behave like real people.

It was a magnificent performance. His demeanor changed throughout the meeting as he shifted from Spanish to Cashinahua. His comments in Spanish were very formal, cold, and almost harsh. He held his body rigid. When he switched to Cashinahua, his body relaxed and he spoke softly, with great humor, almost grandfatherly. He reaffirmed traditional values while instructing them that in their dealings with the outsiders, they were subject to a different set of standards. He impressed the mestizo teacher with his forcefulness as a headman while assuring the community that he did not want to coerce the thief to return the stolen shoes, behavior that would be inappropriate for him as a headman. He also reminded them that it was their obligation as a community to shame the thief into changing his ways. The following morning the teacher found his shoes sitting on the steps outside his door. The thief was never publicly identified.

Memory 6

I had just settled down to sleep on my last night in the village in mid-September 1997 when I heard a voice saying, "Ba, (friend, buddy), I want to talk with you." It was Grompes. I crawled out of bed and joined him in the front room of the Clinic.

As he sat behind his desk and I sat on the stool next to the table that held my laptop and notes, he sighed deeply and said, "You're leaving tomorrow. When will you come again?" "I don't know," I responded. "Do you want me to come back? I can't come bringing lots of trade goods like Roberto demanded," reminding him of the tense confrontation I had with his son several weeks earlier. After reassuring me that I would always be welcomed as long as he was alive, he said, "We are brothers; we are good friends." He then started to reminisce about the good times and bad we had shared over the years, about how I saved his father's life shortly after I

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arrived in 1955, about how many times we had gone hunting together, how I had helped him pay off his debts to the patrón and taught him how to deal with the economy of the outsiders, and how I had taught him and his cross cousin Mario how to write in Cashinahua. He talked about all the changes he had experienced, many of which I had shared with him. I reminded him of how much I owed him, how living with him and his people had changed my life. We talked, we laughed, and we even cried a bit. After nearly three hours, he stood up and walked to the door. “Tomorrow is going to be a hard day. We need to get some sleep.” He gave me a big hug and left.

Grompes Pudichu Torres was a successful hunter, the husband of four women and lover of many others, father of 12, grandfather of 58, great grandfather of at least 10, headman, health care provider, and more. I am proud to add that he was my brother, my friend, my buddy. He taught me how real people ought to live.

NOTES

1. Although the Cashinahua acknowledge that they are called and known by others as Cashinahua (*kaxi narwa*), bat people, they call themselves *huni kuin*, real man/men.

2. For background ethnographic data on the Cashinahua, see Kensinger 1995. For a discussion on some of the changes the Cashinahua have experienced, see Kensinger, in press.

3. Jefe de la Comunidad (head of the community); Agente Municipal (municipal agent); Teniente Gobernador (lieutenant governor); Pastor de la Iglesia (pastor of the church).

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