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Matsigenka Corporeality, a Nonbiological Reality: On Notions of Consciousness and the Constitution of Identity

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DAUGHTER: It seems to me we have said these words before, somewhere else.

POET: Then you can soon work out what reality is.

DAUGHTER: Or dreaming!

POET: Or poetry!

—August Strindberg (*A Dream Play*, 1901)

In the ethnography of Amazon peoples during the last thirty years or so, their conceptions of the body have come to attract much interest. One reason for this increased interest is that Amazonian notions of corporeality do not conform to what constitutes, from a Western or modernist perspective, conventional suppositions based on biological assumptions. Since few, if any, would be prepared to dismiss the different Amazonian perspectives as produced by irrational world views, these conceptions have come to challenge the conventional anthropological understandings of humanity. The richness of the ethnographic descriptions indicates moreover that the body and associated ideas about corporeality are something that the peoples indigenous to the area consider to be central to their conception of the world. The recent ethnographic attention paid to notions regarding the body means that there is now extensive material presenting many and varying ideas and perspectives. One issue that is at the core of much of this interest is the relationship between physical body and consciousness, as it has been described and analyzed by such authors as Århem (1993), Gray (1996), and, above all, Viveiros de Castro in his truly seminal article on Amerindian “perspectivism” (1998). Here I want to explore how consciousness and corporeality articulate according to Matsigenka people living in the Urubamba and Manu River regions in southeastern Peru. This relates to an overriding theme of the essays in this volume, which address such issues as where the faculty of cognizance is

thought to be located and how this localization influences the perception and understanding of the world, as well as how one interacts with its various denizens.

TWO TENDENCIES

Allowing for a certain degree of generalization and simplification, the various perspectives on the relationship between body and consciousness that are of relevance here can be subsumed and described in terms of two main tendencies. The first tendency puts stress on the corporeal form. To the adherents of this tendency, the body functions as a mold of the “bearer’s” subjectivity, whose point of view will vary according to corporeal shape. Different classes of beings are disposed to perceive the world from distinct points of view according to the shape of their bodies (Viveiros de Castro 1996:128; 1998:471). Moreover, all kinds of beings conceive of themselves in human shape, and alterity is produced by the perception of other classes of beings in differently shaped physical bodies. Consciousness and knowledge are thus actualized in bodily form, which means that there supposedly exists a straightforward and uncomplicated correlation between the body and the perceived subjectivity of “Self” and “Others” (Vilaça 2005:450). The focus on corporeality signifies that this tendency stresses the uniformity of each species and, hence, studies within this tendency are concerned primarily with interspecies relations.

This approach has little to say with regard to intraspecific variation and individual agency. To understand how people see and act in their world we must turn to the second tendency. Here, consciousness is emphasized and seen as constituting the body as a social subject. A central tenet of this tendency is that each being is constantly formed in social interaction in which elements such as morals, kinship, and affection play a prominent role. The thinking of people is shaped by them being social and moral beings rather than because of their particular physical form (see Overing 1985a, 1988; Gow 1991, 2000; McCallum 1996; Belaúnde 2000; Londoño Sulkin 2005; Santos-Granero *intra*).

The different foci assumed by these two tendencies result in the ascription of opposed epistemic models to the peoples of the region. Studies made in conformity with the first of the tendencies described above often assume that epistemic uniformity is a foundation of Amazonian ontology. In agreement with such a postulation, Viveiros de Castro suggests that Amerindians conceive of a “spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity” (1998:470) signifying a common subjectivity of beings

in a multinatural world. In contrast, the second tendency acknowledges a “multiverse” where knowledge is socially acquired and relative to particular situations. Concurring with this latter perspective, I argue that subjectivity for Matsigenka people emerges in the social settings in which a person is a part. The perspectivism of Matsigenka people and their understandings of associated notions of bodily transformations differ from the views presented by Viveiros de Castro (1998) and others, in that bodies are considered to be of an eminently social nature, and from which it follows that it is the noncorporeal cognizant self (*isure*) that determines outlook and identity. Since aspects of self are socially rather than physically constituted, they take precedence over the body, and are, as a result, less variable than the corporeal form. Given similar social conditions, the person remains the same irrespective of physical shape and the physical body is in certain respects merely a shell that contains the self.¹

The Matsigenka conception of self, as I conceive of it here, admittedly has much in common with other concepts, for example, Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) “subjectivity” and Santos-Granero’s (*intra*) “vitality.” However, in contrast to these concepts that primarily refer to general and abstract principles, “self” refers to that which is individually specific in what Matsigenka conceptualize as a quality of the soul. Every animate being has a soul that contains aspects of both vitality and subjectivity, but each soul expresses these in a unique manner. The individual articulation of subjectivity and vitality is formed through the particular experiences and influences that bearers have been exposed to during their lives. The condition in which the cognizant self is associated with a particular individual means that it is linked to the body of that person. It is, however, not the physical shape of the body that is of significance in this context, but rather the body’s function as a receptor of sensuous perceptions and as a means to transmit and implement the intentions of the individual. The importance of the body lies, thus, in being located at the interface between different persons, that is, in its social nature.

As a rule, Matsigenka people do not reflect upon the epistemological presuppositions that form part of how they conceive of themselves and the world in which they live. With the exception of notions regarding the soul as object, these assumptions constitute to most Matsigenka a kind of tacit knowledge that, although far from monolithic or uniform, is commonly taken for granted. An inkling of the nature of these assumptions can be elicited from the way that my *compadre* Jordan Koriki solved the problem of finding an adequate expression for the concept of *nosure* when he helped me to translate a song about manioc beer. In the song, one line that underscores his problem reads *oga osuretaganakena nosure*, which he eventually rendered

“the *masato*—she makes me think of—my soul and/or my thoughts and/or my true self.” Although epistemological presuppositions of this kind are not elaborated upon, they can be discerned in, for instance, rites and mythology. The public performance of such cultural registers creates conditions for the emergence of shared understandings that form a conceptual foundation, which apparently is subscribed to by many Matsigenka and is therefore rarely a subject for reflection.

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH: THE EARLY FORMING OF THE SELF

In various life cycle rites, assumptions about the development of the individual self are clearly evident. An examination of, for instance, the ritualized behavior linked to the first period of a child's life, from the moment of conception to a few years onwards, allows us to discern some crucial notions regarding the formation of the self of a baby. According to Matsigenka people, an animate being consists basically of three substances: blood/flesh, bone, and soul. In the formation of the fetus, women are generally assumed to contribute to the blood/flesh and men to the bone. People generally say that they are ignorant about the origin of the soul, but when pressed they usually suggest that it is external to the human part of procreation. However, the soul needs the physical body in order to come into being, although it is subsequently not necessarily tied to the flesh and bone and can leave the body for shorter or longer periods of time without producing detrimental effects. The soul detaches itself from the physical body with ease. Detachment occurs regularly throughout the entire lifespan of an individual, for instance, every night while dreaming.

Matsigenka people do not practice the *couvade*, but a number of regulations associated with giving birth affect the lives of the members of the household into which a baby is born. The regulations not only affect the parents, but also the other members of the household who must take care not to break any of the rules, lest the child be exposed to danger. The regulations are principally of a prohibitive nature, telling what must not be eaten or what must not be done. In ethnographic descriptions, such prohibitions against eating certain animals are commonly explained by the effects that the meat will have on the physical shape of the baby, often with dire consequences during delivery (cf. Baer 1984:251; Bennet 1991:169; Johnson 2003:114). An example of such a dietary taboo is the prohibition for pregnant women to eat tapir meat, which is supposed to give the fetus a head so big that it will become difficult for the baby

to leave the mother's womb and, thus, put both at peril. However, it is not the tapir meat as such that produces these effects, because tapir meat only affects fetuses and nobody else. This prohibition, and other similar ones, are apparently related to the precariousness of individuals involved in the particular contexts to which such prohibitions are applied. If these kinds of regulations are not honored during pregnancy and later, then the household members run the risk of losing their control and monopoly over the formation of the baby during the upbringing of the child because other beings may intervene and influence the baby's development. If the baby's soul² is captured and taken away by a nonhuman being, the baby will be stillborn. If the baby maintains its soul, this nonhuman influence will produce physical and/or mental alterations. Having a harelip is one kind of physical characteristic that is taken as an indication of influences from a demon (*kamagari*) in the forming of the newborn. Formerly, it is said, such deformed babies were killed because they might turn dangerous, since the nonhuman influence was not just physical but also affected the personality of the newborn who was part human, part demon. However, nonhuman influences do not necessarily produce physical transformations. They may also result in mental alterations affecting the form and expressions of the self that may not be evident until later in the child's development.³

Matsigenka people consider small children's souls to be particularly volatile because souls are assumed to be only loosely attached to the physical body during the first years. What makes the early period of childhood more precarious than other phases of life is that the soul at this stage has not yet managed to develop a strong social attachment to parents, to siblings, or to any other member of the community. People thus fear that the soul will lack the motivation for returning to its body. Moreover, when the soul is outside its physical shelter it is not accessible to those who maintain the corporeal form of this world. A child's soul that has left its body cannot be properly protected from unwanted influences. It runs the risk of being co-opted by other beings. An important motive for many of the treatments to which babies are subjected is to secure the development of their souls' social attachment to the households of which they are part. For some time after birth, babies are given hot, fragrant baths several times a day. The purpose of these baths is not primarily hygienic. The fragrance that is produced—by flowers and aromatic leaves that have soaked in the water for a while—serves to keep away malignant forces that otherwise may interrupt the socialization process within the household and influence the development of the baby.⁴ Significantly, at birth not only the newborn baby receives these baths. All members of the household wash in such water because they all form part of the immediate

setting into which the baby is arriving. They are therefore responsible for influencing its development.

Since the social setting into which a baby is born is potentially composed of both wanted and unwanted actors trying to influence the child's development, the motive for keeping up the various rules associated with gestation and birth is first and foremost to allow for the child's socialization into the human world without the intervention of other, nonhuman, contenders. Due to the fear of unwelcome influences, the rules associated with this early period of a child's upbringing are intended primarily to regulate the relationship of the household members with nonhuman beings, in order to keep them at a safe distance from the baby. Only indirectly do the rules concern the adults' immediate relations to the baby. The behavioral regulations that affect the household members of an unborn or recently born baby are effectively a complement to the "ordinary" upbringing of the child. Such regulations serve to inhibit unwanted influences on the formation of the self, and, in so doing, to facilitate the socialization of the baby into its proper human community.

PERSPECTIVISM AND SELFHOOD IN NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

Most Matsigenka myths involve some kind of social interaction between representatives of different species and, frequently, also some kind of bodily transformation. For example, myths abound with instances of human women having sexual intercourse with nonhuman beings and later giving birth to babies with the physical form of their partner. The following myth about a man and his encounter with peccaries, recounted by the Dominican Father Secundino García (1936:86–87),⁵ makes a point of the actors' perception of each other, which usually is not as clearly accounted for as it is here:

The swidden of a man was frequently visited by peccaries that came to eat of his manioc. As soon as he became aware of their presence he chased them away. One day when he went hunting in the forest he encountered the peccaries.

"You are the one who always chases us when we come to eat manioc," they said.

"No, it is not me, it is another man," he responded, thinking that if he gave himself away they would kill him.

All the same they wanted to kill him. One peccary did, however, stop the others from putting an end to the man, noting that it would be better to bring him along and to use him as their servant. And so they decided.

The story subsequently tells about the return journey to the home of the peccaries. On the way back, the party comes across palms and fruit trees. The peccaries force the man, who still preserves his human shape, to climb up and throw down coconuts and fruit for them to eat. The man is not happy. On one occasion he tries to get rid of the pigs by remaining in the tree that he has climbed. As the pigs threaten to overturn the tree, the man is obliged to climb down and his attempt at escape fails. Eventually, they reach their destination and here we return to García's account of the story:

The man stayed to live with the peccaries and with time he himself turned into a peccary. One day the peccaries returned to eat of the manioc from the man's swidden. As they arrived, a young man saw them coming and he recognized one of the pigs as the owner of the swidden:

"That must be my fellow countryman," the young man said to himself and stalked his neighbor to catch him. The young man hid himself behind a shrub and when the man who was transformed into a peccary came close, the young man sprang forth and caught the peccary man. When the young man talked to him, he did not reply because he did not speak like a human being any longer. The young man brought the man to his house and scalded him in hot water.⁶ In that moment he started to speak and he regained his original human shape.

Central to this myth is that the physical transformation of the man into the shape of a peccary is produced only *after* they have established convivial relations, that is, when the peccaries and the man have begun to treat each other as similar in a social sense. Becoming alike is, as a result, an effect of being close and of sharing necessities in a disinterested manner. Transformation is here produced by socialization rather than by predation, as some would have it, and, to Matsigenka people, it seems as if physiology (or at least important aspects thereof) could be seen in terms of sociology.⁷ As a corollary, the physical transformation experienced by the man is largely ephemeral. His idiosyncratic consciousness remains the same while he physically adapts to the conditions of his new life. When the young man encounters him together with the band of true peccaries he is readily identified as the owner of the swidden. Thus, even though the peccary man has in certain respects become a peccary, he simultaneously retains his individual identity. The physical body serves, primarily in regard to his individuality, as the cloak that envelops him. In effect, this myth suggests that the personal identity and conscious self are not as unstable as the physical form may be.

We do not learn from this myth how the man who is transformed into a peccary conceives of himself. However, the resilience of personal identity is corroborated in other stories. In one such myth a man is left to die in a high tree by his wife and his brother.⁸ Perched high up on a branch and unable to descend, he is saved by the crested oropendola (*Psarocolius decumanus*) who live in that tree. Although the man is transformed into a starling and lives with his saviors and marries a female of theirs, he retains his rancor towards his former wife and brother. He nourishes a wish to one day avenge himself. Eventually an opportunity to retaliate presents itself. He returns into human shape and settles the score. He then takes on the starling shape once again and flies away, returning to his new family. It is to be noted that the man becomes a starling only in regard to shape since he remains the same person with the same manner of perceiving the social universe, that is, he retains his original personal identity. The assumption that bodily form does not affect the social agency, nor the memory and consciousness of the subject, appears frequently in narratives and can thus be taken to be a commonly held idea among Matsigenka people.



Figure 1. Dario Mahuantiari, teller of myths, and his wife Mirian, Koribeni, Alto Urubamba

THE SELF IN TRANSDIMENSIONAL RELATIONS⁹

This resilience of the self in Matsigenka thought is crucial in conceptions of the social and of sociability in everyday relations with neighbors, as well as in transdimensional relations across cosmic borders. In regard to transdimensional relations it is, for instance, fundamental in Matsigenka peoples' conception of metempsychosis (when the soul of one is replaced in the body by the soul of another). This element is central in shamanic practice, where the shaman's soul is replaced by that of his auxiliary spirit as the shaman takes off to places that are encountered in other dimensions (cf. Baer 1984; Rosengren 2002). The physical body is here clearly conceived of as a cover. Matsigenka people themselves talk of it as *imanchake isure* ("his soul's clothing"). The body is, however, not just a simple wrapper. It is indispensable in the *social setting* because it provides the spirit with the physical means of communication with those humans who have not crossed the boundaries between the different dimensions of the universe. Accordingly, the body is instrumental in this context as a social and communicative tool.

The importance of the body as a means of communication is related to conditions of comprehensibility, which require that verbally interacting parties must be located in the same dimension of reality in order to understand each other, since each mode of verbal communication is exclusive to a particular dimension. The grunts, chirps, hisses, and roars of animals are considered by Matsigenka people to be linguistic expressions that ordinarily are incomprehensible to humans but perfectly clear to the pigs, birds, and snakes that produce these various forms of speech. For a human to understand nonhuman speech it is necessary to cross over to other dimensions of reality. It is perhaps significant that, in Matsigenka myths, animals are never reported to produce anything but speech.¹⁰ Thus, when the peccary man is rescued, he is at first unable to speak with his savior since the two are found in different dimensions and communicate according to different modalities of speech. It is only when the peccary man is made to return to the human dimension through the scalding hot bath that he is able to speak as a human and make himself understood by fellow humans.

The man's ability to speak with the peccaries when he initially encountered them in the forest is, in effect, a sign that he has crossed into a dimension that is ordinarily not occupied by human beings. As long as this man has not developed closer relations with the peccaries, his aptitude to speak with them does not affect his physical shape. To the contrary, it is the maintenance of his human body that provides the pigs

with a servant. Hence, bodily form does not determine consciousness to Matsigenka people. Rather, it is the other way round.

Movements between cosmic dimensions are usually facilitated by the use of psychoactive drugs such as *ayahuasca*, datura, and tobacco. Such transdimensional movements also take place when dreaming and when the body is unconscious. Furthermore, on certain occasions that often (though not always) seem to be associated with some kind of crisis, the movement can spontaneously take place without any of these measures. Cosmic journeys are, however, commonly undertaken with the express purpose of meeting with certain spirit persons (*saangarite*) who normally do not appear in the human dimension. When traveling in this way, the soul detaches itself from the physical body, although it is not bodiless, because the soul has a body of its own. The spirit body¹¹ is similar to the corporeal body. It has the same instrumental functions when manifest in nonhuman dimensions, which is what enables the soul to act. In effect, the spirit body is essential for humans as it permits them to communicate in a comprehensible fashion with these nonhuman beings and it provides an alternative means to the metempsychosis that is practiced by spirits when they visit the human dimension.

Obviously then, the physical body is not merely a dress, and such a characterization must not be taken as anything but a metaphor. The body is, in this context, more like the blind person's stick through which he or she experiences the world. The body is, thus, clearly sentient.¹² The sensuousness implied in the soul's spirit body is conceived of as a prerequisite for its sociability¹³ in this, as well as in other, dimensions. Most importantly, the body provides the means for speaking in a comprehensible way. Accordingly, the physical body is conceived of as a necessary requirement for being able to communicate. However, it is not sufficient just to have a body to enable a meaningful verbal exchange. There is also a requirement that the interlocutors' conscious selves are positioned in the same dimension of reality. The localization of one's conscious self in a particular dimension of reality is manifested primarily in the capacity to communicate and to socialize with those other conscious selves who simultaneously are in that dimension. To be situated in the same dimension as other beings does not, however, necessarily signify the sharing of the same point of view, since one's self remains basically the same irrespective of the dimension in which one is located.

When the "peccary man" in the myth spoke with the peccaries that he encountered in the forest, he had crossed into another dimension. The physical transformation that he eventually undergoes can thus be said to be initiated with his capacity to socialize with the peccaries. But, because of

the agonistic situation, he does not transform physically at this stage. This occurs only later when the man and the peccaries have established a relation of mutual friendship. Frequently, physical transformation in Matsigenka narratives seems, as in this myth, to require the previous establishment of close relations, or at least, by explicit intentions, the establishment of such relations.¹⁴ Therefore, the change of dimension affects first the ability to socialize and then subsequently (though not necessarily) the corporeal form that is affected only as a consequence of convivial intentions. The analysis of Matsigenka narratives seems to suggest that the primacy ascribed to the sociable faculty for producing corporeal transformations follows from the conception of the process as voluntary and as produced on the initiative of the one undergoing the changes who, hence, is not being transformed but rather transforms.

The disconnectedness between corporeal form and consciousness in Matsigenka thought is readily apparent in relation to the kinds of being that are classified as *tsori* (signifying that they look like, but still are different from, human beings).¹⁵ In the eyes of Matsigenka people, all non-Amazonian peoples are in this sense *tsori*. They only appear to be human in regard to their physical appearance and manners. The similarity is only illusory, however, since *tsori* are beings created by the god Kentibákori and who therefore lack certain crucial qualities that are characteristic of “true” humans. In turn, true humans were created by the god Tasorintsi. Among Matsigenka people, as in many parts of the Amazon, humanity is seen principally as a moral condition (cf. Gow 1991; Londoño Sulkin 2005, *intra*; Overing 1989, 1999; Rosengren 2003a; Santos-Granero 1991). In contrast to true humans, *tsori* are distinguished by their basically unreliable and untrustworthy nature. In relation to such moral characteristics, customs like dress and food habits serve as mere diacritical signs.

A similar kind of distinction as that between “true” humans and *tsori* is made between certain classes of animals and classes of demons that have similar appearances. To mark this difference the suffix *niro* is added to the denomination of the “true” being. The spider monkey, for instance, is in Matsigenka called *osheto* while the physically similar demon is called *oshetoniro*. The anteater is *shiani*, while the demon double is *shianiniro*, et cetera. Under certain circumstances humans may be turned into a “*niro*-kind” of demon at death. Sorcerers are said always to change into this kind of demon, usually of the tapir (*kemariniro*) or the white collared peccary (*shintoriniro*) kind. Likewise, pregnant women who die before they manage to give birth, and the fetuses they carry, are turned into *shintoriniro*. In the first case it can be assumed that the new appearance of the sorcerers is due to their intimate relations with demons, while in the latter case it is

demons that provoke the death of the women and the unborn children they carry. These cases do not, however, deal with bodily transformations in the sense discussed here, since it is the death spirit (*kamatsiri*) of the deceased who is clothed in a new body, while the old, human one, is buried and left to decompose.

The employment of the linguistic qualifiers *tsori* and *niro* demonstrate that the similarity indicated between the beings in question is only superficial. However, at times it may be difficult for an inattentive person to distinguish between such similar, but different, beings. This indistinctiveness is something that occasionally is taken advantage of by those demons that share physical appearance with “true” humans or animals. The similarity can be seen as a kind of mimesis that is not defensive, as apparently it often is in the animal world, but offensive, as it is used to prey on credulous and unsuspecting individuals. As a result, this kind of demon attack is described as *gasuretagantsi*, a concept that Shepard (2002:207) renders as “to have one’s soul snatched,” but which also can be translated as “to have one’s soul raped or married away.”¹⁶ If anyone is led to consort with a being whose true nature is not the one it seems to be, the unwary person may lose his or her soul, which produces the slow pining away of the physical body and eventual death. To prevent being duped in this way, Matsigenka are usually suspicious towards strangers whom they come upon in the forest where demons roam. Therefore, when venturing into the forest, people make preparations both to avoid being fooled by demons that look human, as well as to forestall being mistaken for one. Various kinds of medicine are brought to elude being approached by demons. To prevent being mistaken for a demon a facial painting is applied, since demons are supposed never to paint themselves. By applying face paint, the bodily surface is thus manipulated to mark both a difference of identity and the absence of foul intents. The smell of the annatto (*Bixa orellana*) used to produce the dye employed is, moreover, obnoxious to the demons. The paint therefore also serves as a demon repellent. At the same time, the odor of annatto paint is appreciated by the *saangarite* spirits whom Matsigenka usually try to attract as a means of defense in dangerous situations, which further enhances the protective function of the dye.

Matsigenka comprehension of the world is apparently a complex intellectual and sensual procedure. In a critical appreciation of Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) account of Amazonian perspectivism, Santos-Granero (*intra*) addresses the insufficiency of reducing the mode of perceiving different kinds of being to sight alone. On the basis of his analysis of Yanéscha peoples’ conceptions, Santos-Granero demonstrates the importance of hearing. Various protective measures employed by

Matsigenka people in their relations with members of other dimensions also show the importance of the olfactory sense.¹⁷ For Matsigenka people, odors and smelling are recurrent topics in their discourse on interspecies relations. The use of different fragrant substances in everyday life (bathing in fragrant water and the use of annatto paint has already been mentioned) is often associated with their relations to nonhuman beings. To Matsigenka people, smelling is, in this context, not only a contingent effect of certain substances, it is also employed as a communicative means in combination with other means of exchanging information.

The physical similarity of those beings that are described as *tsori* and *niro* to other classes of beings is clearly not assumed to signify that the various kinds of beings share a similar perspective on the world. On the contrary, the distinctive classes of beings are thought to perceive of both the physical and the social environment in their own particular ways. The respective outlooks of the classes of *tsori* and *niro* beings and those that they look like are therefore not determined by their common corporeal form. The significant differences between these categories of being have evidently nothing to do with physiology. The different points of view become evident when variances in modes of behavior are considered. The various modalities of conceiving the world are produced by the distinct formative processes that they undergo as individuals belonging to different classes of being. Hence, it is sociology rather than physiology that is again fundamental in the shaping of the different identities of the various classes of being.

BEING, SOUL, AND SELF

The distinction that Matsigenka people make between a “true” being and one that only has the appearance of such, reveals how both being in, and knowing of, the world are conceived. It is clear that physical similarity does not generate a particular kind of disposition that automatically produces a similar perspective on the world. Outlook and identity are, on the contrary, related to the self and its conscious agency that is formed throughout the life of a person. To Matsigenka people, the idiosyncratic consciousness constitutes an important aspect of what corresponds to their concept of *isure* (“soul”). Among ethnographers working among Matsigenka people (as well as among the neighboring Asháninka) the concept of *isure* is often considered to be rather peculiar (cf. Weiss 1975:428; Baer 1984:127) since, with the meaning of “soul,” it exists only in the possessive form. In Matsigenka, nouns commonly have both a possessive and a nonpossessive

form. The possessive is usually generated by adding a prefix to the word stem indicating personal possessive such as, for example, *i-sure* (“his soul”) or *no-sure* (“my soul”) et cetera. The nonpossessive is generated by adding the suffix *tsi* to the stem, so that in this case it becomes *suretsi*. What makes the word peculiar in the minds of these ethnographers is that *suretsi* does not mean “soul” but “ghost.” The kind of being that is described here as a “ghost” differs from the conventional European notion of a “ghost” in that it is *not* the soul of a deceased person who haunts the living.¹⁸ On the contrary, Matsigenka people consider this “ghost” to be a being in its own right, although a rather odd one. The peculiarity of the *suretsi* is in its social indeterminacy that is inherent in the nonpossessive form. These beings are, consequently, characterized by unboundedness and anonymity. They lack not only tangible bodies but also, and primarily, the social connections through which they are made into individual selves (Rosengren 2002:93). The *isure* differs from the *suretsi* since it has gone through a process of formation that contains the complexity of a corresponding concept in Latin languages (e.g., *formación* or *formação*), which includes shaping, structuralization, and education in which the soul gains its individuality.¹⁹

When Matsigenka are asked to explain the significance of the concept *isure*, answers are usually vague, but at the same time they indicate a complex fusion of various ideas. Obviously, *isure* is not a concept that Matsigenka find easy to define. When asked to clarify it, people commonly give various alternative interpretations, as did my *compadre* Jordan Koriki when he translated the manioc song referred to above. Most frequently people mention both “that which I really am” and “that which I am thinking.” Such attempts to explain the concept suggest that Matsigenka do not think of the individual primarily in a physical sense, but more as the outcome of the complex combination of socialization, experience, and knowledge. Evidently, *isure* is also closely associated with the particular understanding of the world of the individual.²⁰ This also means that the self of a human is principally formed in human social contexts, while the self of a *tsori* being is formed in a *tsori* social context. The conception of *isure* is thus close to what we could describe as consciousness and cognizance, or rationality, and, at the same time, the vital principle without which living is impossible.

The vitality that inheres in *isure* is prominently featured in the following biographical story,²¹ told to me as I was inquiring about shamans and sorcerers. An evil man, whom the narrator assumes to have been a sorcerer (*machikanari*), had been killing many people and he was greatly feared by those who lived in his neighborhood. He was captured eventually by Kashiriari Maeni, a mighty shaman (*seripigari*), living in the region of the Alto Picha River in the Lower Urubamba area. Kashiriari Maeni

brought the evil man home where he forced him to kneel down and then he blew—*Sbo!*—on the top of the man’s head, that is, on the fontanel that is supposed to be the principal gate through which the soul leaves and enters the body. Kashiriari Maeni then pulled out the man’s *isure* from his head. (The narrator clenched one of his hands and put it on the open palm of the other, and then he lifted the closed fist in a movement as if he was pulling upwards.) The evil man immediately fell lifeless to the ground, but Kashiriari Maeni lifted him up and poured back some of his *isure* through the head, whereby the man regained his consciousness. However, the man was not his old self anymore. He could not speak properly and he staggered around without much control. (The narrator illustrated the condition of the evil man by walking around as if he was dead drunk, making silly faces, and twaddling nonsensically to the great amusement of the audience.) He was also very weak and, as night fell, he died.

This brief story is interesting since it clearly depicts the soul as something concrete and tangible, which suggests that it is thought of as having a specific place within the body. The association between thoughts and the heart—common in many parts of the Amazon (cf. Belaúnde, *intra*)—is also made by Matsigenka people. The central position given to this muscle can be elicited linguistically since the same root, *niga*, is employed to form the verb “to be in the middle” (*niga-nki*), and for “heart” (*nigá-kintsi*), the literal meaning of which can be rendered “that which is in the middle.” However, the heart is not only conceived of as being located in the middle of the body, it also constitutes the core of the body in a more symbolic sense that refers to its association with the soul.²² The fact that the core of a tree is referred to as *osure* (cf. Shepard 1999:90) can probably be taken as an indication of how Matsigenka people conceive of where the soul is situated in the body.

As noted above, the soul manifests itself in a more substantial way in other dimensions such as those visited during cosmic journeys and while dreaming, or when it appears in bodily form, that is, in what I above have called the “spirit body.” The concrete character of the soul signifies, among other things, that it can be divided in the way that the powerful Kashiriari Maeni (who as shaman was thoroughly experienced in transdimensional matters) treated the evil man’s soul. More importantly, this underscores that the soul is not a disposition or a perspective, but a thing that can be handled and shaped in accordance with explicit intentions. This plasticity of the soul lies behind what the Matsigenka conceive to be the unique self of every individual.

CONCLUSION

In a sense, the self, as discussed here, may seem to be more or less what Viveiros de Castro (1998) speaks of in terms of the “subjectivity” common to all beings. An outcome of this perspective is that both individual identity and modes of knowing of and relating to the world become functions of corporeal shape. In contrast to the preeminence rendered to corporeality for forming the disposition of subjectivities to perceive of the world in a specific manner, the ethnography presented here demonstrates that bodily form to Matsigenka people is *not* coterminous with consciousness. Although they are parts of the self, both body and *soul* are seen as distinct. Consciousness, as understood by Matsigenka people, is nothing that can be reduced to physiology.

The idea that the physical aspect of self is the wrapping of the soul (or spiritual aspect of self) is widespread in the Amazon. This notion of the corporeal body as an envelope is commonly linked to a conception of the nonphysical aspect of self as the location of both consciousness and self-awareness. Thus, although the body incorporates various sensuous faculties, it is through the cognizance of the soul that individual consciousness of the world is formed and sensory experiences are made intelligible and possible to act upon. Santos-Granero’s (*intra*) account of Yanéscha conceptions of knowledge is largely concordant with Matsigenka peoples’ notions as well, which means that they distinguish between material and nonmaterial, or spiritual, dimensions of the world. As among Yanéscha people, Matsigenka people conceive of the spiritual dimension of the world as being accessible only to the spiritual part of the self that thereby acquires knowledge and that subsequently can be diffused to others. On the basis of such knowledge the soul gives meaning to sensory stimuli and through the rationalization of experience the soul is fundamental in forming individual identity.

A corollary of the awareness of self is the awareness of Other, which also is a condition for sociality. Self-awareness is, accordingly, a prerequisite for encounters of significance that implies an exchange of, at least, the experience of meeting. Any kind of confrontation with an Other will, moreover, influence the awareness of self. Thus, individual self-identification emerges as a result of socializing. The effect of influences of this kind depends on the strength of the self-awareness (which means that those in gestation and those recently born are more easily influenced than their elders) but also on the volition of self. Self-awareness contains an element of “becoming-other” to borrow a concept from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). But, for example, as Overing (1985c) has shown, socializing can also entail an aspiration of “becoming-alike.” In

effect, perspectivism among the Matsigenka is not primarily a question of perception but of sociality.

Self-awareness is, accordingly, not a mere disposition or perspective, the particularity of which is shared by other physically similar beings. Rather, it is something unique, formed by the specific historical conditions that influence the development of each individual's soul. In contrast to common subjectivity, the self is highly personal and, as such, individual diversity is the standard. While the identity of subjectivity is given by the corporeal form, the identity of the soul is formed in the betweenness of social interaction.

NOTES

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1. In the context of this essay I put the cognizant aspect of self in focus. The physical aspect of self is not without importance and, as becomes clear below, to Matsigenka people the physical and non-physical aspects are linked, mind does for instance rely on the body for its sensuous experience of the world, as well as being a tool for communication. However, the physical aspect of being is seen, above all, as an envelope of the cognizant aspect, the shape of which is mainly the product of the cognizant aspect's sociability. When I use the concept of "self" here it is the idiosyncratic consciousness that emerges and is formed in the interaction with other similar consciousnesses within specific historic contexts that is intended.

2. Matsigenka people distinguish between two types of soul: the bone soul (*itonki*) and a free soul that is called *isure*, which is the kind of soul referred to here. According to Baer (1984:129) some Matsigenka may entertain a belief in a third kind of soul, one he describes as an eye soul (*ishigentiaarite*). As far as I am aware, Baer is the only ethnographer to mention this third kind of soul. The belief in it is apparently not common among Matsigenka people. Among the Arawak speaking peoples of the Montaña region, soul conceptions seem to vary. Beliefs in multiple souls are found among both the Yine (Piro) people (cf. Gow 2001:64) and the Yanasha, among whom notions of an eye soul also have been reported (cf. Santos-Granero *intra*). Conversely, Weiss (1975:427) maintains that Riverine Asháninka people only entertain beliefs in a single soul.

3. For a detailed examination of the effects of nonhuman influences that leave no physical signs, see Londoño Sulkin (*intra*).

4. Similar kinds of baths are administered as part of the mourning process. In concordance with the argument of this essay, Shepard (2002:214) sees the baths taken a few days after a person's death as a defense against death spirits (*kamatsirini*).

5. Father García's rendering of the narrative structure follows Western literary conventions. This means that certain aspects of the myth are lost. For the present purpose, this version of the myth can be used, since it is the general content that is of interest. With regard to content the version does not differ in any significant way to other versions that I have heard or seen (cf. Arias 2003).

6. García (1936:87) suggests that the scalding with hot water is done to take off the bristles as is done with slaughtered pigs before cutting them up. I believe though that the kind of scalding referred to in the narrative is of an entirely different nature, primarily because the peccary-man is not dead and the young man has obviously no intentions of butchering him. The bath referred to is most likely of the kind that mothers give their babies (see above) and for the same purpose, that is, to cleanse them from nonhuman influence with the effect of maintaining or regaining (as in the myth) humanness.

7. This is paraphrasing Seeger, Da Matta, and Viveiros de Castro (1979), who argue that Amazonian sociology could be seen as physiology.

8. This is a well known myth in the Upper Urubamba area. I have heard it told a number of times by different narrators, with only minor variations that principally are produced by the individual narrative style of the various performers. The version that I use here was told to me in the native community of Koribeni by Mr. Dario Mahuantari.

9. The concept of "transdimensional relations," as used here, is related to the notion of different points of view. Matsigenka people conceive of cosmos as a multiverse with overlapping and interacting worlds, or dimensions. Accordingly, the change of dimension does not require a physical dislocation, since the transference between dimensions is basically achieved through attuning differently to the cosmos.

10. Asháninka people also conceive of animal sounds as different languages (Weiss 1975:426).

11. Matsigenka people do not make a conceptual distinction between these two kinds of bodies and they talk about both in terms of *ivatsa* ("flesh, body").

12. The account that Santos-Granero (*intra*) gives of the Yanéscha peoples' notions of the sentient body, and also to some extent the one that Lagrou (*intra*) gives of the Cashinahua "thinking body," agree with corresponding Matsigenka conceptions that also resemble the distinction that Piaroa people make between a "life of thought" and a "life of the senses," understood as constitutive parts of human beings (see Overing 1988:174).

13. The condition that both the peccary and the oropendola in the myths discussed here are of a distinctively gregarious nature is probably just a coincidence. In other myths persons are transformed into more solitary species though transformation always occurs to enable conviviality.

14. Such notions seem to be held elsewhere in the Amazon as well. An example is found in one of the Cashinahua myths that Lagrou presents (*intra*) in which Paketawā, the principal protagonist, transforms into an Inka, an emblem of alterity among Cashinahua people, only through sharing and pacific coexistence.

15. The meaning and origin of this term has been interpreted variously by different authors. One of the earliest explanations to be found in the literature

belongs to Tessmann (1930:84) according to whom it is derived from the Quechua word *cholo* (with the derogative meaning of “*mestizo*”). Weiss (1975:232) similarly suggests that it is derived from Quechua but from the word *churi* with the meaning of “son.” According to France-Marie Renard-Casevitz (personal communication, May 2000) *tsori* could be translated as “false” or “untrue.”

16. The initial syllable, *ga-*, is the root of the verb *gagantsi*, the meaning of which covers a wide semantic field. Two of the various potential translations distinguished by Snell (1998:86ff) are “to catch, grab” and “to marry,” but, at least in the Upper Urubamba area, it is also used (perhaps as an extension) as “to have sex” and “to rape.”

17. See also Belaúnde (*intra*) on the effect of the stench of blood on transdimensional relations and Lagrou (*intra*) on sexual odors as negatively affecting relations to game and fish.

18. Notions of that kind of specter are also entertained by Matsigenka people who denote it as *kamatsiri*.

19. In some Germanic languages there seem to be concepts that are similar to the Latin counterpart. In, for instance, Swedish there is a word *bildning* (which seems to be related etymologically to the English concept of “building,” both as a noun and as a verb) that besides “formation” and “structure” also signifies “education, good breeding, refinement and training.”

20. This understanding seems to closely resemble Piaroa conceptions, as described by Overing, who notes that a “... verb that designates existence, *a'kwarü*, is derived from the noun *ta'kwarü* (“the life of thought”) ... As human or as god, one can say *tü akwarus* (“I live, I exist, I am”) ... To have *ta'kwarü* ... entails the acquisition and learning of both cultural capabilities ... and responsibility, or consciousness” (1988:175).

21. Among Matsigenka people at least two kinds of narrative genres can be discerned. Up until now this article has made use of myths while the story to be presented below belongs to the genre that I provisionally have called “biographical” (Rosengren, 2003b) as it allegedly deals with accounts of historical persons. Biographical narratives differ from myths in that the events accounted for are supposed to have taken place in a past that is closer in time to the present than the undefined or distant past of mythic accounts. Events described in biographical narratives are usually situated in time no more distant than the time of the rubber boom but no closer than the childhood time of the eldest people living in the neighborhood. A crucial characteristic of these kinds of stories is, accordingly, that they are presented as reminiscences of actual events in which known people, who are now dead, took part. The narrator, which again is Dario Mahuantiari, presents the principal protagonist as his maternal grandfather.

22. In Asháninka *nošire* means both “my soul” and “my heart” (Weiss 1975:426f).

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