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Finding the Taste of Knowledge: The Orphan in Indigenous Epistemologies

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The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.

(Merleau-Ponty. *Intertwining – The Chiasm*)

...Henceforth it behooves us, who were orphans and slaves of the World-of-Beginning, to search for the true flavor, the true sweetness of the coca that he gave us to *mambe*, of the *ambil* that he gave us to lick.

(Muinane myth)

Abstract

Following the suggestions of my indigenous consultants, that to better understand their theories of knowledge one has to start from myth, I take here their myth, “The origin of education” as the starting point for analyzing the alchemical processes of embodiment in indigenous epistemologies, and I do so in dialogue with information produced through an ethnography of learning, and with other, Western, theories of cognition. The myth relates the story of the “Orphan”, a central character in the People of the Center’s moral and mythical narratives. The Orphan searches for the “taste of knowledge” through a demanding personal quest that is simultaneously a process of self-discovering and self-shaping. The quest involves experimenting with different plants and technical procedures, which are evaluated by the effects produced on the Orphan’s “physical-spiritual body”. Shunning the Cartesian distinction between the physical and the spiritual, the People of the Center’s epistemologies emphasize the *poietic* processes that link knowledge to the ongoing fabrication, and maintenance, of personal and collective selves, and of the world in which they live. The People of the Center make the relationship between knowledge and well-being explicit: true knowledge shows in the ideal state of generalized well-being, an issue that acquires critical significance in indigenous debates concerning the recreation of authoritative knowledge, and of authority more generally.

In this article I tackle an issue that has been haunting me since 2004, when, returning to Amazonia with a project on indigenous education, titled “Learning in Practice”, I was told by my longtime Uitoto and Muinane consultants that since all knowledge is already given, one can’t say that people construct knowledge in practice.¹ This affirmation took me by surprise; by that time I had spent more than two years with the People of the Center,² and it seemed to me quite clear the value they place on the connection between knowledge and practice, for instance, in how they mobilize practical learning to challenge State-sponsored educational programs that separate knowledge from practical activity. Indigenous movements to reform education in their communities led me to think that learning couldn’t take place independently from practice, but apparently my interpretation of their notion of “practice” was mistaken. In order to help me better understand their indigenous educational

philosophy my Muinane consultants suggested that we start from their myth “the origin of education”. This complex myth condenses Muinane conceptions about learning and teaching, and relates them to social organization and territoriality. The myth, which is an essential part of teacher training, establishes the three basic principles of Muinane pedagogy as entailed in the concepts *fagoji* “counseling speech”, *kaavaji* “loving speech” and *dúdicamaaje* “work”. The myth consists of four interwoven sections that follow a prologue: The Land of Dawn, The Mother, The Grandson of the Center, and The Grandson-Orphan of the Center. Each part refers to a phase of creation, and, more precisely, to the gradual materialization of humanity and sociality through knowledge transmission and embodiment. In this article I concentrate mostly on the character of the Grandson-Orphan of the Center.

During the time I spent with the People of the Center I heard them repeatedly self-define as a “society of orphans.” This surely is a commentary on the devastating effects of the Amazonian rubber genocide and of assimilatory educational practices forced on indigenous children through Church-run boarding schools, called orphanages. However, the picture is more complex than that. The orphan appears in widespread myths in the northwest Amazon (Romero 2003): Nhiãperikuli-the orphan, among the Baniwa (Wright 2013a:237); Mujnuyi-Pitchi, the blowgun orphan among the Kabiari of the Vaupés (Correa 1989:58-73; Mejía and Turbay 2009); Kari’irimi among the Yukuna (Van der Hammen 1992:152); the orphans Musach among the Achuar (Descola 1987:97); and the Tikuna orphaned twins, Yoi and Ipi and Aiküna and Mowatcha, who similarly to another famous couple of siblings, Hunapú and Ixbalanqué of Mayan Popol Vuh, travel to the underworld to recover the dismembered body of their father (Bottasso 1992). The idea of a “diminished hero” is, of course, an essential element in many tales of the world’s mythologies (Levi-Strauss 1985), but in Amazonia recorded events related to the trade of orphans and native forms of slavery (Santos-Granero 2009a) go further by helping to ground this character in the particular social and historical context.³ Among the People of the Center the category of the orphan denotes a captive, slave, servant, and a man who chooses to live in his wife’s *maloca* under the protection of his father-in-law, in so doing constituting an exception to virilocality (Gasché 1982; Pineda Camacho 1985:61; Preuss 1994⁴). And as noted by Landaburu and Pineda writing about the Andoke (1981:55-56), orphans play the role of culture founders.

Another circumstance shaped the reflections on orphans presented here. During the collective writing of a book on indigenous images of public wealth, the editor, Santos-Granero, urged us authors to consider the inverse too: indigenous notions of poverty. While several authors noticed that in the claims people make about themselves poverty is regularly associated with the state of being an orphan, interestingly among the People of the Center the claim of being “as poor as a little orphan” usually comes from individuals who are not poor: successful farmers, heads of *maloca*. As Uitoto and Muinane consultants made clear: “The orphan is not poor! He is the richest of all!” They also described the orphan as “holder of knowledge”. These claims are significant in many ways. First, they reflect the extensive use of dissimulation in native discourse, consistent with the assumption that knowledge must be shown by deeds and not by words, and also acting as protection against the destructive influence of envy. And as I will go on to discuss, dissimulation is also deployed as a key pedagogical strategy. What’s more, these claims delineate a particular cosmological perspective in which plenitude gradually materializes through persistent effort, and where lack can be seen as abundance in potential.

“The Origin of Education”: The Alchemist at Work.

As the transcription of the whole myth occupies about 60 pages, I present here a summary. I limit paraphrases and eliminate repetitions and sections that seemed to have no direct relevance for the present discussion. Selection was difficult, and the poetics of the original text has, of course, lost some of its force, in spite of my attempts to maintain it. Two sons of the narrator have translated the Muinane text into Spanish, and also provided a textual commentary that is essential to my interpretation.

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At the beginning, the Grandfather-Life of the Center is just breath: breath of life, cool breath, breath of turning-into-person, breath of making appear, breath of sighing. In the pot of all cool herbs is his origin.

Later on, with the word of humanizing, he transformed himself, he acquired a voice, and he came to see and to recognize his own body. He started to think how to have people, how to multiply. With the word of coca and tobacco of life, he created people to accompany him. They were invisible, they were only spirits. But those he had created to be his companions darkened the planet with an evil thought.⁵ Everything was surrounded by smoke, there was no place to sit. Even if he was the very Land-Life-of-the-Center, they had shut him off.

In the midst of smoke he found something the size of the tip of a thorn and on that he sat. He started calling “Where are you, Land-Life-of-the-Center? One by one, the Lands of Beginning – Land of Dusk, Land of Extinguishing, Land of Darkness – answered, and he cursed them and pushed them away. As he rejected the Lands of Beginning, little by little the Land of Dawning grew for him. He stretches out, extends his feet, sits comfortable, and starts dialoguing with his own knees. As the world is dawning, his dialogue is dawning. He flowered and gave fruit.

Whilst he is dialoguing, he sees something like his own body: his shadow. He blows the breath of tobacco of humanizing to fill his shadow with his own being and the knowledge of how he came to life and humanized himself. The shadow started to answer and sensed the aroma of the ripening orchards. What a marvell! That smell opened up his hearth. The Grandson⁶ fed himself and felt himself to be a real person.

But early humanity, those that the Grandfather had banned at the beginning, wanted to destroy him. On his chest, which is the planet itself, they rotted, they peed, they shitted. The Grandson looked at his body and, feeling disgusted, he stood up. In that moment the Land of Beginning fell over this planet and smashed it. So Our Grandfather let the Mother descend. She planted two trees at the front and at the back of the house as two supporting pillars so that the land above won’t crush her. Again she rejected one by one the Lands of Beginnings, until the Land of Early Morning answered – “*síríríí... síríríí... síríríí... síríríí...*”⁷ – the Land of Dawning answered, the Land of Sunset answered.

The Grandfather names her:

“Woman of the Centre, now you are Cool Woman of the Centre, Woman Life of the Centre.”

“I am”, she answers.

“Cool Mother, Sweet Mother, Mother of Sweet Manioc of the Center.” [In her is the word of love – *kavaji*]

“I am”, she answers.

“Grandmother Cool Flame of the Center. Grandmother Cool Clay of the Center. Grandmother Stone of Polishing.”

“I am.”

Naming the mother as each of the components needed to make a clay vessel, he mixed the ashes of the stick of coca, of tobacco, and of sweet manioc with the clay, and kneaded it with the cool and sweet froth of Our Mother. Placing it on her mane of cool herbs he created the vessel of life-birth. He polished it from within.

Then he took all the fruits that had been spoiled by the beings of the Land of Beginning. He piled them up and set them on fire. He put the vessel upside down on the fire and he burned it carefully, turning it from side to side until it was red-hot. He took the juice-essence of Our Grandmother of Sweet Manioc and poured it into the pot. Instantly an aroma burst forth: *sbbbb!*

Then he cooled it down: He took the juice-essence of Our Cool Grandmother of the Centre and poured it into the pot. Something marvellous, cool, sweet, savoury, tasty!

He repeated the process with the juice-essence of Our Grandmother of the *dumo* herb, Grandmother of Sweet Basil, Grandmother of the Cool Herbs of the Center – one and the same but different aspects of her being – and poured it in the pot. From the pot an aroma burst forth: *saha!* She was now consecrated, her essence crystal-clear. Pronouncing the word of counsel – *fagoji* – he placed her in the Center.

In this pot, the Grandson Life of the Center came to life. The Grandfather showed him the planet, his coca, his tobacco, his sweet manioc, his orchards overgrown with weeds, his

grandsons who were enslaved,⁸ and tells him to fix it. But he said he couldn't. So the Grandfather filled him with the breath of his life-giving tobacco, with the breath of sweet tobacco, of cool tobacco, of the tobacco of seeing, of the tobacco of finding. The Grandfather entrusted and invested in him these powers. He strengthened his spirit. He incorporated him with the breath of the tobacco of humanizing. He infused his spirit, his hearth, his energy. He formed his brain, his head, his bones, his spirit, his whole body. With the breath of the tobacco of searching, of calling, of asking, of diverting, of rejecting, of tranquilizing, he created and strengthened his vital being, his brain, and his hearth. With the breath of tobacco of shaking, of awakening, of shielding, of bringing forth, of hushing, of capturing, and with many more tobaccos, he invested him.

Then, he incorporated the Grandson with the breath of the tobacco of enlightening and the tobacco of embarrassing. With this light he lined him from the inside.

Then with the thread of the tobacco of warning, he connected him with the breath of all knowledges against the evils that covered this planet. With this he formed his whole body, so that he could control his temper whilst he worked. Then, he incorporated all this in the being-juice-essence of our Grandmother Sweet Basil.

So, with the tobacco of sweeping, the Grandson swept away the litter, and recovered the people who had been enslaved without leaving anyone behind. Stunned by the World of Beginning, they couldn't see: in their eyes, only the images of the World of Beginning appeared. They couldn't hear: in their ears, only the uproar of the World of Beginning resonated.

He started dialoguing alone, *mambeing* and licking *ambil*. This dialogue reached the ears of those people who were confused. One of them, slowly, drew near to where the sound came. Little by little he went to sit by His side.

"Grandfather,⁹ what is that that you are speaking?"

"What else can I speak? For you not to be bored, restless, sad, fearful, discouraged, that's what I'm speaking".

"Grandfather, what is it that you are doing?"

"What else can I be doing, I'm *mambeing* my coca and licking my tobacco".

"Perhaps, can I also *mambe* coca and lick tobacco as you do?"

"Sure son. This is for you".

Saying this He gave him just a little coca and tobacco to try. In that moment, the essence penetrated his being and made him sigh with relief. A taste that he had never tried!¹⁰ He just came to hear, he came to see, he came to understand, he recognized himself, he came to see his body and to recognize the Grandfather's body, he came to realize that he was a person.

But then he looked at the people who were persons like him but who lived confused and lived just for living. He came to see, to hear, and to understand what had been confusing them: the voices, the words, the sounds of the beings of the World of Beginning, and this led him into doubt: "Who to believe?" A World in which minor beings, such as crickets, cockroaches, birds, animals, were, and looked like, persons: "Who to believe?" He came to recognize the voices of mammals, birds, insects, and the voices of those from the outside.¹¹ He realized that everything is complicated and confused, that everything is not the same.

The Grandfather told him "don't pay attention to them, or they won't let you sleep quietly. They won't let you eat. They can turn you crazy. Rather, look first where you are going to sit." And he humanized him as a true person.

Then the Grandfather called the people with his word, and dialogue became savoury. He taught people how knowledge is organized. He taught what real advice, and real love, are. He made people feel what true health is, saying "from now on you have to live in this way." This is the science he came to teach and show on a clear planet, under the light of embarrassing.¹²

Then, he entrusted to those who would be the chiefs the stick of coca and the seed of tobacco, saying "with this knowledge you are going to give life to your descendants." He placed them in the land, making them responsible for a group of people, and of a portion of territory: "With the word of coca you sit here with your grandchildren".

As the grandsons started diffusing this knowledge, the dialogue reached the Cool Grandson of the Center. He was an orphan. Saying to his younger brother: "Brother, I think I'm going to pick this up" he went.

It was a marvelous world he entered: speech of conjuring, speech of love, speech of baptizing, speech of work, speech of counsel.

“Son, who’s coming.”

“Grandfather, it’s me.”

“What makes you going?”

“What else can make me going: your marvelous speech that is heard from afar.”

The Grandfather looked at him and saw that he came with true intention.

“Son, this is not mine, this is for you.”

Saying this He sat him by his side and gave him a little tobacco and coca to try. This essence poured down and filled his whole being, cooling him, sweetening him, and calming him like cool water. *Taab!* Something marvelous! The Grandson Orphan of the Center felt relieved, he sighed, he came to feel his body.

The Grandfather gave him one seed of tobacco and a stick of coca the size of half a nail¹³ saying: “receive this with the true hand, light a fire, and when it cools down, seed it. Do not let it go. This is for you to think how to have a good life, and to turn what you think into reality. This is coca-tobacco-of-work, to think how to work and to relieve the tiredness of work, to receive the woman who will help you, to calm the child, to orient the grandsons.” With this teaching He filled him up. But the orphan didn’t see how He had made it, only the taste of coca and tobacco lingered in his mouth.

He did what the grandfather said: lit the fire and when it had cooled down he seeded the coca and the tobacco. He went home and sat down, only thinking of this. When he went back in the morning the coca and tobacco had sprouted. What a marvel! He fertilized it: “With this I’m going to think how to have a good life”. His spirit was only into this. As he released these words, they manifested themselves in him, and he matured.

Fertilizing the plants, he thought: “how is it that my Grandfather prepared it?” He picked the first leaf at the bottom¹⁴ and chewed it. “No, this is not what my Grandfather gave me to try.” Then he tried mashing the raw leaf. “No, this is not what my Grandfather gave me. How was it?” Then he tried again: he toasted the leaf on a potsherd. He was getting close: he discovered it was toasted. “Now what?” He took a dry leaf of *caraná* palm, he burned it, he pounded it, he mixed it, and he *mambed* it. Good! It was mixed with ash! But still, it wasn’t the same. He pondered.

Next day he took the dry leaf of *udagomo* “mouse *Cecropia*”. He burned it, got the ash, he mixed it, he *mambed* it. But still, it wasn’t right. How was it?

Next day he tried with the leaf of *gomo* “white *Cecropia*”. Still, it wasn’t that. “How is it that my Grandfather did this?” Only of that he thought.

Again, he went and got the leaf of the center. Suddenly he remembered the ‘sweet grape’ “*degui Cecropia*” that was growing behind the *maloca*. He took the dry leaf and burned it: “how is that my grandfather prepared what he gave me to taste?” He made the pestle, the bowl for sifting, and the bag for filtering. Nothing was an obstacle to him. Then he mixed the substance with the *Cecropia* ash, he pounded it, he sieved it. No one told him “do this, do that”. The juice-essence of the tobacco and coca that he had been given to taste, from the depths of his being guided him.

As he sieved it, he kept asking: “I wonder how my Grandfather made what he gave me to taste”. So, he took a shred of *caraná* leaf and using it as a spoon he tasted the powder. In that moment, the essence filled his mouth and all his being - *taab!* - something fresh, sweet, effervescent! “That is it! That is what my Grandfather gave me to taste!”

At last he had found the taste of knowledge – the taste of the true coca and tobacco of life – and he felt happy. He came to be called Cold-Grandson-of-the-Center, *Feene siïken iyachi*. From then on he could understand, he could organize the knowledge that he was going to teach the grandchildren: the true word of advice, *fagojï*, the true word of love, *kaavajï*. Knowledge, word, and practice that he was able to understand, to direct, and to disseminate.¹⁵

“Sit well! Think well!”

The mythical narrative I summarize above helps ground my discussion of the alchemical person in “indigenous epistemologies”, that is, indigenous theories of knowledge and modes

of knowing. As it has been noted for other Amazonian cultures (Descola and Palsson 1996; Fausto 2007; Rival 2005; Santos-Granero 2012; Viveiros de Castro 1998, among others), for the People of the Center as well humanity is a fragile construction incessantly prone to disintegration, which needs to be maintained through intentional processes of fabrication. According to Viveiros de Castro (1987:31) fabrication involves “a systematic combination of interventions over the substances that connect the body to the world: corporeal fluids, foods, emetics, tobacco, oils and vegetable dyes.” This idea is reflected in the myth as well, offering an example of what Santos-Granero (2009b, 2012) calls the Amerindian “artifactual anatomies” and the constructional character of Amerindian cosmologies. Each of the four sequences of the myth takes up the perennial process of humanization, starting small and gradually working its way up through a spiraling of falls and achievements. Indeed, humanity is a fleeting condition, always threatened by the dangerous encroachments of the Land of Beginning. But more than on substances, the myth puts particular emphasis on processes and actions: forming, blowing, filling, polishing, burning, kneading, lining, even naming, understood here as a speech act (see Londoño-Sulkin 2006). It is through these actions that substances are subjectivized, at the same time allowing sensual perception to become more subtle and sharper. It is thanks to these alchemical processes that the Grandson simultaneously “finds his body”, and the knowledge embodied in it.

These ideas lead to the following key questions: can we claim that similarly to other Amazonian people (Santos-Granero 2006), for the People of the Center as well the body is a source of defective knowledge while real knowledge is always obtained by means of incorporeal perception and thought/emotion? Is the body the causative agent of knowledge or is it caused by knowledge? My suggestion is that by starting to address these questions, the difference between the indigenous and the Western notion of practice should become clearer. This is not a minor point, as it establishes the terms in which knowledge would be eventually evaluated.

My ethnography of learning suggests that the People of the Center’s own understandings of knowledge processes are not articulated on mind-body dualism. They speak of a ‘physical-spiritual body’ as the point of articulation of visible and invisible manifestations of knowledge, which they describe as overlaid but joined plans mutually affecting each other. As noted, knowledge is the creator’s cosmogonic essence of life that is inscribed in all things created, acting as a defense against malevolent agents who sabotage the ordered world with powers, but without true knowledge. So, knowledge involves a normative dimension: it is the “law of origin”, entrusted to people to live well together in community, interact properly with other beings, and maintain life and good health. But perhaps more interesting are the ways in which *knowing* is understood. Since all knowledge is already given, for the People of the Center learners do not construct knowledge, but find it through a personal search that is simultaneously a process of self-discovery and self-shaping. Accordingly, knowledge transmission is typically nonintrusive and it deliberately avoids direct didactic explanations. However, knowledge transmission among the People of the Center is far from being unarticulated. Support for learning is meticulously organized, and sophisticated pedagogical strategies foster a learner’s heuristics, alert perception, and capacity for introspection. Ambiguity and dissimulation are key pedagogical tools; by displacing finite solutions, they engender a constant questioning and push the apprentice to keep up the search.

While individuals engage in teaching and learning, they carefully attend to the material qualities of the body and the senses, and deploy regulatory bodily practices – such as vomiting, cleansing with fragrant herbs, inhaling the smoke of hot chili and aromatic plants, and restraining from food, sleep, movement, speech, and sexual intercourse – which consultants explained to me as ways to simultaneously “educate the body” and “open the mind.”¹⁶ To educate the body does not mean to put it aside or repress it so that the mind can roam free, but to tune perception and introspection. An educated body is not only “the locus of moral issues that are fundamental to becoming fully human” (Wright 2013b:52) but it is also a body fully conscious of its material and immaterial constituents, and able to achieve a sentient engagement with the world.

For knowledge’s intimate relation with cosmogonic forces, it is considered to be “hot” and a potential source of debilitating illnesses. The more one knows the more one becomes susceptible to the energies of malevolent inhabitants of the Land of Beginning. Knowledge

pursuit unlocks this dangerous, warlike world. Also, knowing is considered to be a work, and as any labor does, it produces waste, sweat, and tiredness that have to be properly cleansed and relieved – “cooled down” – in order to prevent the inception of debilitating illnesses. One of the main causes of failure is when an apprentice carries the search too far, overestimating his or her capacities, uncovering dangerous spheres of knowledge without knowing how to cool them down, or using knowledge for her or his own advantage to the exclusion of others. Both teacher and learner share the responsibility of relentlessly guarding against evil, of controlling, and barricading the “paths” from whence evil (disease, conflict, famine, madness, self-interest...) arrives. The People of the Center make the relationship between knowledge and well-being explicit: knowledge is evaluated on the basis of underlying intention and tangible contribution to generalized well-being, and as such, it is a defense against illness. This idea is resumed by the maxim “think well, speak well, and work well, to turn this into abundance for all”.

As the apprentice engages in learning, he or she must build defenses against disruptive forces that threaten personal and collective health. Bodily techniques are intended to strengthen the apprentice’s physical-spiritual body. Someone’s ability to learn can be enhanced by a knowledgeable elder through spells and other ritual actions, and it is common to hear that such and such person is particularly skilled because he or she “has been cured”. Food is also seen to affect cognitive processes, and the making and offering of proper food demonstrate women’s knowledge.

The epistemology of the People of the Center shows close similarities to that of the Cashinua, which, according to McCallum (1996:347-8), sees the body as “grown” through knowledge:

Knowledge and body are seen to coexist so tightly in this understanding that disturbances in the one can have dire consequences for the other [...] The “ethno-epistemology” of the Cashinua makes a series of connections between exterior matter and certain kinds of speech, their transformation into knowledge in the body, and the exteriorization of that knowledge in the form of value-laden, potentially social action. This series of interconnected processes constitutes the “Cashinua body”.

My ethnography shows two main differences between the above perspective and that of the People of Center. First, in the epistemology of the People of the Center there is no lineal causality between knowledge and the body, as they are both made of the same divine substance and grow simultaneously. Second, for the People of the Center the body is not made grown only by external intervention or the agency of others, as McCallum notes for the Cashinua. In the process of embodiment that makes knowledge manifest, the person plays a fundamental role. More than that, the person *becomes* person only through effort. The human body is in fact seen as a repository of the creator’s knowledge, but this lies latent unless people materialize it through their own work. Commenting on the myth one consultant provided the following explanation:

The concept of *practice* doesn’t exist in Muinane thought. Important for us is the concept of *work*. Work is the materialization of knowledge. There are two baskets of knowledge. One basket is already woven since the beginnings of time. Another basket is that which each person weaves as s/he acquires knowledge. Knowledge is the fiber that one weaves. It is also the content that fills the basket. Until a person dies s/he searches for the woven basket, and, at the same time, learns how to weave it. To weave the basket, and to fill it, is what people search for in their practice, and to live according to the knowledge contained in the basket.

And he adds: Then, the one who has no knowledge of this [the creator’s] word, basically he is not person, he is nothing, he’s like the living dead. (Muinane thinker)

He refers to knowledge through the imagery of a woven basket, which encompasses the action of interweaving different strands, the form of the woven container, and the things contained in it. Such imagery also refers to the womb and the human body-mind-spirit

(Candre and Echeverri 2008). The “basket of life” is at the same time the starting point, and final goal, of intention, disposition, and sheer work. So, knowledge is not acquired through practice, but, as my consultants explained, it is *put into practice* and brought forth through work, and so it becomes manifest. Such re-cognition is progressive: at first, the grandson just sees his body, later on he will feel it; he only smells knowledge, but if he endures the search he can eventually taste it.¹⁷

Body and World

The anthropology of the senses has long called on anthropologists to resist the temptation to perceive other cultures through our own sensory models (Classen 1990). An increased awareness of how sensory experience is understood in other cultures has led to reversing the primacy of sight that has characterized Western epistemology in the past three centuries, to account instead for how “meanings are invested in and conveyed through each of the senses” (Classen 1997:405; Stoller 1997). For instance, Stoller (1989) has shown that for the Songay of West Africa the body, not the mind, is the locus of learning. Gary Urton, working on Andean astronomy, shows that “the total perception of time and space will involve the union of all sensual perceptions of change in the environment” (1981:32); while Reichel-Dolmatoff writes that for the Desana “sight recognizes categories while hearing leads to an understanding of them [...] Everything has an “echo,” and “only by being able to 'hear the echo' can one truly know what is being seen and what it symbolizes” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978:152). The importance of intersensory perception, and of a controlled sensory environment similar to that deployed in the People of the Center’s learning strategies, has also been noticed in regard to the links connecting art and healing, as in the “fragrant” chanting and designs of the Shipibo-Conibo and the Yaminahua (Gebhart-Sayer 1985:172; Shepard 2004:257; see also Whitten and Whitten 1987). Moreover, for the Yekuana, engagement in art production, specifically the creation of basketry designs, is indispensable for the learning of oral tradition (Guss 1989).

Among the People of the Center, individual accounts of the circumstances in which people have acquired, and occasionally lost, knowledge, create vivid associations with real or imagined places and with the beings that inhabit them and with whom relations must be skillfully negotiated.¹⁸ The shunning of the Cartesian distinction between the physical and the spiritual takes the form of an intuitive science that arranges environmental clues to create poetic images with cognitive value, in which all the senses work in unison. This can be evinced by the following interpretation provided by a consultant:

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

Truly “the whole body knows” (Kensinger 1995:239), and it is not a body-as-text, but a sensuous body. We can see this “physical-spiritual” body as a crossing-over or a “chiasm” – I borrow these terms from Merleau-Ponty (1968) – that merges subjective experience and objective existence. For Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1968) perception is not simply embedded within and constrained by the surrounding world, but it also contributes to bringing the surrounding world into being. Building on this realization, Maturana and Varela propose a way to see knowledge and cognition “not as a representation of the world “out there,” but rather as an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself” (1987:11). These ideas were further developed by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991:9) who use the term *enaction* to “emphasize the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs.” For these scholars cognition is an aspect of the sensory body and “knower and known, mind and world, stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or dependent coorigination” (Varela et al. 1991:150). They further elaborate this idea as follows.

We have seen that colors are not “out there” independent of our perceptual and cognitive capacities. We have also seen that colors are not “in here” independent of our surrounding biological and cultural world. Contrary to the objectivist view, color categories are experiential; contrary to the subjectivist view, color categories belong to our shared biological and cultural world. Thus color as a study case enables us to appreciate the obvious point that: chicken and egg, world and perceiver, specify each other [...] Our intention is to bypass entirely this logical geography of inner versus outer by studying cognition not as recovery or projection but as embodied action. (Varela et al. 1991:172-173)

A similar alternative to dualism is offered by Ingold, who argues that human beings are simultaneously constituted “both as organisms within systems of ecological relations, and as persons within systems of social relations” (Ingold 2000:3). He sees the human being “not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind, and culture, but rather as a singular focus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships” (*ibid*:4-5).

In the Muinane/Uitoto myth of the origin of education we have seen how the process of humanization is simultaneously a process through which the world is brought forth, very differently from the Judeo-Christian Genesis in which there is a lineal succession between the creation of the world and that of humanity. As the Grandfather, seated on the tip of a thorn, rejects the Land of Beginning, the world grows and expands *for him*. In a similar way, among the Baniwa, the musical body of Kuwai “made [the world] open up (expand) from its primordial, minuscular size” (Wright n.d.:12). The world and the self develop relationally, and they constitute processes, not things. One instance of this can be found in the view of plants as teachers common throughout Amazonia (Chaumeil 1993; Luna 1983; Schultes and Hofmann 1979). Plants’ teachings gradually unfold as the healer develops perceptual skills: plant-teachers and the healer mutually arise from their intersubjectivity. This echoes Howes’s realization that “... the act of perceiving goes on *in the environment as much as in the brain*. Put another way, the senses are *interactive*, they mingle with their objects, and are not merely reactive to external stimuli” (Howes 2011:436).

To view 'subject' and 'object' as co-arising entails that intersubjectivity is fundamental to knowing, and thus that all cognitive processes are also emotional-affective (see Overing 1985; Overing and Passes 2000; Varela 1999). For the People of the Center, creation is not an individual act but unfolds through a series of co-operations. Even when creativity is a solitary endeavor, its final goal is to “make happiness” and materialize conviviality as the Uitoto expound (see note 15).

The myth of the origin of education makes an explicit reference to animism and to the problem of differentiating humans from non-humans when it claims that even animals “were, and looked like, persons: who to believe?” The answer - “look first where you are going to sit” - is revealing in many ways. The image of the seated person involves positioning as much as it evokes the cosmogonic process and its re-enactment in daily life. It is through this permanent endeavor that substances are transmuted and subjectivized, making persons who they are (see Viveiros de Castro 1998; Londoño-Sulkin 2006). Differentiation is autopoietic in a similar sense to that proposed by enaction theory, for which living systems are autopoietic when they “continuously regenerate the conditions of their own survival and in so doing [...] establish the boundary between themselves and the environment, and thus constitute themselves as unities” (Colombetti 2010:148). Through these processes “living systems necessarily establish a point of view, and moreover a concerned point of view that generates meaning” (*ibid*). Or, as argued by Viveiros de Castro (1998), a point of view that creates the subject. In turn, this confirms Santos-Granero’s realization that the struggle of points of view “is not as much a struggle to impose one’s point of view onto that of other life forms as it is a perpetual effort to prevent one’s point of view from becoming tainted with that of others” (2009b:23). We can see this as the always transient goal of autopoiesis.

The Validation of Knowledge

With the geographical image of “a river with many tributaries” the People of the Centre represent knowledge as a complex system (Landaburu and Pineda, 1984; Micarelli 2003). Ethnographic evidence suggests that before the devastating effects of the rubber boom, the People of the Centre were interconnected in a regional system which hinged on the distribution and articulation of specific knowledges and spheres of territorial control. Social differentiation was reflected in particular skills, which, in turn, were constitutive of a system of exchange between groups. Each *maloca*, or more precisely each patrilineage, owned specialized hereditary knowledge, and was characterized by a certain degree of expertise and exclusive rights. Specialists from different *malocas* gathered periodically into regional or sub-regional councils to plan collective activities, and chieftaincy rotated among *malocas* depending on the task at hand. The articulation of such specificities through exchange relationships and regulated managing practices was the source from which the ordered territory, seen as a multidimensional socio-environmental network, was created and maintained. These views, which echo current ethnohistorical and archaeological findings on the functioning of Amazonia’s regional polities and their “galactic” patterns (Heckenberger et al. 2008, Whitehead 1993), also shape present rationales and processes of interethnic organization (Micarelli 2003).

In the myth of the origin of education each group received its own share of the knowledge of life together with a territory; this entrustment was the source from which not only identity and difference, but also the need to maintain exchange relations with other groups, in a sort of “ecology of knowledges” (Santos 2009), originated. But the Orphan also reveals how the People of the Center handle the tension between rank and egalitarian inclinations, an issue that acquires critical significance in indigenous debates concerning the recreation of authoritative knowledge, and of authority more generally. To review their ideas schematically, knowledge as the “law of origin” differentiates people according to sex, birth order, lineage and clan membership; specialized hereditary knowledge marks exclusive rights and powers, and these differences are both hierarchically and spatially organized. But knowledge as divine substance that is made manifest only by means of a personal effort, makes the status and power of the knowledgeable one achievable by any individual who is capable of enduring the quest. It is through work that the Orphan-Grandson-of-the-Center recreates and legitimizes knowledge. In turn, work is conceived of as transformative agency evaluated on the basis of underlying intention and tangible contribution to generalized well-being (Griffiths 2002; Micarelli 2015).

People’s work mirrors the creator’s feats to maintain life and humanity up against the mythical but omnipresent “world of darkness,” a world of disordered relations. And it is the outcome of work – which “dawns” as abundant food, healthy kin, conviviality – that demonstrates true knowledge (Echeverri 2012; Londoño-Sulkin 2006). I see this indigenous notion of knowledge as the thread connecting the body-self and the social body (Scheper Hughes and Lock 1987; Turner 1995). The myth describes how the Orphan experiments with different plants and processes to bring the lingering memory of the taste of knowledge into being. Sitting in mindful meditation, he measures his outcomes against the feeling he experienced in the Grandfather’s *maloca*, and he perfects his deeds to get closer to that reminiscence. Such deeds are first measured by the effect on the body-mind-spirit of the substances so produced. When the Orphan finally finds the taste of knowledge again, he feels soothed and relieved. Real knowledge should result in a healthy world, where children sleep peacefully and people are happy. Illness and unrest are signs of defective knowledge, thus projecting social responsibility to a scale of titanic dimensions.

So, if it is true that knowledge and skills are largely hereditary and compose a system of rank, more than on inherited power-knowledge the legitimacy of power depends on the impeccability of knowledge, which materializes in collective well-being. These visions take on strategic value in the reorganization of what the People of the Center call a “society of orphans”, a society with potential for resilience and always in the process of becoming (Micarelli 2010). At the same time these perspectives uphold the People of the Center in assessing, resisting, and transforming foreign knowledge regimes, such as those deployed by development’s technical knowledge apparatus. Even if directed at improving the people’s quality of life, development is considered to be a source of misery and unhappiness, and it is

contemplated in indigenous etiologies as one “illness of the White man’s trail”. Nevertheless, as with other exogenous substances that are potentially dangerous and, yet, indispensable to human life, development becomes the object of indigenous predatory pursuits, which are significantly compared to *cacería*, hunting. Once captured, development projects must be “cooled” and transformed through work and other social practices so as to be made apt for human consumption. But development’s technicalities, opaque bureaucratic jargon and requirements, different temporality and forms of knowledge production expressed in chronograms, time-tables, budgeting, and reports, a range of intermediaries, and indigenous own penchant for Western stuff, make the cooling down of development’s pathogenic nature particularly difficult to accomplish (see Micarelli 2003, 2015).

An anecdote may help to appreciate the relevance of these views in present-day indigenous struggles for cultural reaffirmation and autonomy. In 1998 the Colombian Ministry of Culture-Fondo Mixto called for proposals to conduct research on the theme “Histories of Daily Life”. Four indigenous leaders – two elders, one of whom master of *maloca*, and their sons, representing Uitoto Murui and Muina ethnic groups – decided to apply. *Mambe* and *ambil* were prepared to catch this modern prey: development money. Their work proved effective as the prey fell into their trap and the proposal got funded.

The project was based on the idea that in order to be able to respond to development and to propose alternatives, indigenous people had to start from an analysis of their actual situation, in which “tradition” had to be able to account for historical transformations and interculturality. The project revolved around two main points. The first focused on the role of education. Indigenous researchers argued that a decontextualized education such as the one carried out in the community, did not strengthen the visions and practices that guarantee a healthy relationship between humans and their environment, and actually put such relationships in danger. Moreover, school education failed to form leaders. The second objective was to analyze indigenous forms of leadership and their re-organization after the rubber boom genocide and more recent forms of ethnocide. As noted, clans and lineages manage specialized knowledge and skills, are marked by exclusive rights and duties, and are in charge of a portion of the territory. In the multiethnic communities resulting from the rubber boom genocide and diaspora, and nation-state consolidation, internal diversity may become an obstacle to this traditional form of social organization.

Indigenous researchers addressed these issues in the following way. First, they critiqued the development notion of community by trying to organize research activities according to lineage; each of the two groups developed its own approach to the different topics included in the project, which were then compared. Second, to “flip over” development’s exogenous, pathogenic nature, and turn it into something good, the elders decided to name the project anew. The new name – *o abimo erokai*, “look at your body” – re-envisioned the project as an endogenous process of self-discovery and self-making, from which the purpose of curing (illness, conflicts, and, in this case, development) and bringing abundance should ensue. This speech act evoked the mythical process of humanization and put it as a model for the cultural practice of history and continuity.

The human body is thus revealed as the locus of historical consciousness. Past and future worlds are mirrored on the human body: illnesses will become epidemics, and potentialities will be lost unless they are transformed and woven into “a basket of life”. The People of the Center say that the human body is the *shadow* of the ancestors and of future generations. In this shadow line, becoming and origin meet and interpenetrate. The humanity that lives in the present almost seems to be less real than the ancestors and the generations to come. But cast on the human body, past and future only show as rough images, and it is through people’s agency that they acquire a clearer form. Then, the human body is not just the mirrored image of history, but reflects back into history. And to cure the body is the first step to curing history as well.

This process, which reflects a particular kind of historicity, lies at the disjunction of presence and absence. Presence may lose its grip, one may feel dislocated and incapable of acting. Absence, on the other hand, is made present by memory and imagination, and most of all, it is brought forth through people’s work. The People of the Center’s responsible science – whose maxim is “think well, speak well, and work well, to turn this into abundance for all” – sits at this disjunction, and it endeavors to make the unreal possible.

The People of the Center would agree with Maturana and Varela (1987: 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”. For the People of the Center, the alchemical transformations through which knowledge is embodied and revealed establish humanity and the world as entwined and co-arising. What’s more, the search for the taste of knowledge also specifies a particular horizon for the pursuit of well-being. As we anthropologists recognize that knowledge is produced in dialogue, and strive to make our methodologies follow through, the teachings of this indigenous epistemology should not remain unnoticed.

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Notes

¹ Fieldwork was funded by a Spencer Foundation’s postdoctoral grant, and lasted from October 2004 to October 2006. Other fieldwork among the Gente de Centro was conducted during 24 months in 1998-2000, and again in 2009-2010.

² The People of the Center is a self-category that refers to a cluster of eight ethnic groups whose languages belong to four distinct linguistic families. It includes the Uitoto, Muinane, Bora, Miraña, Nonuya, Andoke, Ocaina y Resígaro (Echeverri 1997, Londoño-Sulkin 2006). In spite of linguistic diversity the People of the Center share remarkable cultural and social similarities.

³ Slaves, orphans or subalterns were traded for metal tools, and the fear associated with such trade is still expressed in the ritual “chants of the axe” (Guyot 1979).

⁴ *Jaieniki* (*jaienikičič*), Nc, orphan, slave, servant, poor. Preuss 1994.
<http://www.bdigital.unal.edu.co/1533/35/34ANEX01.pdf/>

⁵ As a consultant explained, “the universe is not in a state of perfection because evil and good are joined. Within the origin of health lies the origin of illness. It starts from creation, because any work produces waste, sweat, fatigue.”

⁶ The Grandfather’s shadow has become the Grandson. Later on in the narrative, the Grandson-Life of the Center is called Grandfather by the new generations.

⁷ *Siririč*: the sound of crickets after midnight. The progressive materialization of the Land of Life is announced by animal sounds. Animal sounds are thought to give signals of the yearly and daily cycles and atmospheric changes, and also of incoming problems (illnesses, gossip, conflicts), or news. In general they may signal an intrusion of the mythical world in this present layer of reality.

⁸ They were prisoners of the World of Beginning. In the People of the Center’s oral narratives people are often represented as cultivated plants (see Candre and Echeverri 2008)

⁹ The Grandfather who is speaking through the Grandson Life of the Center.

¹⁰ “Then the Grandson explains that this Breath-Father, Aroma-Mother, Taste-Son is the word with which children are taught.” [Commentary by Muinane consultant]

¹¹ “His senses open up and he can recognize the voices of spiritual beings.” [Commentary by Muinane consultant]

¹² “Light of embarrassing: when one understands, one has the power to embarrass others. In the World of Darkness no one was ashamed, no one knew what incest was. That is why now kinship norms are taught, as well as respect toward each organism and the environment. For this reason one has to be careful not to live as animals, because we live under this light.” [Commentary by Muinane consultant]

¹³ “For this reason, you can not teach something heavy or too profound to a child. The child gets confused, his body does not have the capacity to bear the weight of such knowledge. One begins by teaching something simple to the children. All action has an order. This reflection orients the adult in how to get organized against things that occur every day.” [Commentary by Muinane consultant]

¹⁴ “The leaf at the bottom refers to myth: that is where one should start from” [Commentary by Muinane consultant]

¹⁵ In the Uitoto version of the myth I also collected, when the orphan finally savors the “taste of knowledge” again, he feels a breath of cool soothing air falling on him while a voice tells him: “Search no more! Now make happiness!” The narrative goes on to recount how the orphan secretly maps the chart of the Grandfather’s *maloca* onto his body. Once the *maloca* is built he is able to inaugurate a dance for his ritual career, a true expression of conviviality.

¹⁶ The title of this section, “Sit well! Think well!” is a maxim I often heard during transmission of oral knowledge. For Londoño-Sulking (2006) the aesthetic image of being buttressed is associated with rhetoric and practices of virilocal postmarital residence and patrilineal corporativity. I agree with him that the image of being seated conveys an ideal of moral composure, but beyond that, I see it as directly evoking the sacred task of the creator, who seated in concentration discerns impending dangers and orders the cosmos through thought and speech (see also Candre and Echeverri 2008). The seated person, man or woman, embodies the primordial hub of power-knowledge that radiates and expands, as consultants argued, like “a dome” for the protection of the people, but that can also be cast predatorily against the enemies.

¹⁷ Anthropologist Salima Cure was told by an elder that young people who start to consume coca (*mambe*), or those who consume it sporadically, can’t still taste coca, they just smell it (Salima Cure: personal communication).

¹⁸ The inscription of knowledge in material and immaterial features of the environment, and the incorporation of these features in knowledge processes, closely connect knowledge and place-making, a central issue to further understand indigenous view of ecosystems’ management, and their strategies for claiming land rights in the face of displacement and relocation.

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