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Instrumental Speeches, Morality, and Masculine Agency among Muinane People (Colombian Amazon)

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INTRODUCTION

This is a paper concerned with matters of morality, particularly with how “People of the Center” (Medio Caquetá region, Colombian Amazon)¹ talked about the admirable, the worthy, the despicable, and the evil in agents’ practices, actions and subjectivities. It features an abstract discussion that presents my own interpretive, schematic synthesis of People of the Center’s understandings or accounts of morality and cosmology, but also and more centrally addresses how individuals reflected on these accounts and used them intelligently, reiterating them, contesting them, and transforming them.² Men and women among Muinane and other People of the Center produced numerous discursive depictions of themselves, of others, and of their interactions, often concerning their own competence and morality or others’ lacks thereof. These moral portrayals of themselves and of others—whether in the form of brief anecdotes or longer narratives—were told to me frequently and explicitly during the time I spent in Muinane communities. As a result, I soon lost my initial culture shock at such apparent immodesty and shrewishness. I started to think about such moral portrayals as a matter of puzzlement and then focused on them as examples of people citing much-used narrative frames and symbols. In this paper I attend selectively to a particular set of portrayals and practices that pertain mainly to men: those concerning forms of knowledge that Muinane people deemed their own and different from other people’s. In this regard the *mambeadores* (adult men who consumed ritually the substance *mambe*³) stressed the great amount of knowledge they possessed, the authentically Muinane or patrilineal character of this knowledge, the propriety of their processes of acquisition of it, the legitimacy of their use of it, its effectiveness, and the respect and fear others had of them because of it. Women too produced numerous self-depictions, but expressed

less of an obsession with their own agency, and no claims to dangerous knowledge. Most of the People of the Center I knew—both men and women—also produced numerous negative evaluations of other people, concerning the same issues. They surreptitiously and openly denied the amount, effectiveness, and legitimacy of others' knowledge, good will, formal correctness, and so on. They often found "proof" of others' lack of knowledge and of their misdemeanors.

I was curious about why individuals among the People of the Center produced such moral portrayals, and about what these expressions achieved. I will attempt here to make the case that they were motivated by a certain ideal of agency, a sense of what was admirable or desirable in human subjectivity and action, tied to their awareness of the possibility that their own actions and subjectivities would be framed as immoral, animalistic or otherwise inadequate by others around them. The latter interpretations, often voiced critically, were always a risk among them⁴ (see Storrie *intra*, on people's judgments of claims to awesome shamanic power).

Individuals among the People of the Center produced moral self-portrayals reflexively, at times with self-conscious intent to persuade, yet usually without questioning the given nature of the performative categories posited by the vocabulary in which these portrayals were couched. They were very aware that their ways and actions were likely to be evaluated by others, and in fact many of their moral self-portrayals took the form of quotations of what others—kin, but also the dead and other kinds of beings—had purportedly said about them. My conviction is that these discourses—along with other discursive and nondiscursive practices of knowledge that featured or were spoken of with a detailed vocabulary of strong moral evaluation⁵—created and recreated the very nature and intelligibility of the kinds of agents People of the Center understood they were or could be. Furthermore, these kinds of agents were intelligible to the People of the Center in the frame of a certain kind of cosmos, constructed dialogically through the same reiterative symbolic deployments that constructed the agents. Part of what persuades me that this was so was the great coherence—or even identity—between People of the Center's ways of acting upon the world "out there," their ways of acting upon individuals' bodies and subjectivities, and their reflexive talk concerning these matters and their own and others' actions. These pictures of the world, of agency and of subjectivity within them, were compelling. People appeared to feel, and they certainly interacted, in ways that cohered with a very unique, complex kind of cosmos. This life indeed had a hold on them.⁶

I argue that a "thick" understanding of social life of the People of the Center—including in its dense complexity the moral self-portrayals that first

engaged my curiosity, but also more “traditional” anthropological matters such as the vicissitudes of their social organization or cosmology—requires attention to the subjectivity of individuals, to their motivations, and to their self-interpretations, all of which were partly shaped and constituted by their articulated understandings of agency, emotions, morality, and so forth. I cannot produce a watertight causal account of how the picture of agency in question came to have a hold upon people, how it was transformed into individuals’ desires or callings, into the experienced wish or aspiration to be a certain kind of agent or to be perceived as such. I assume the position that my understandings of the subjectivities of individual People of the Center are inevitably based on my understandings of my own subjectivity, which itself is formed in social interaction. I experience many of my beliefs, desires, and motivations as manifestly obvious. Probably because of the symbolic forms that I have acquired over the course of my life that constitute or shape my interpretations, I simply *see* that certain forms of action and subjectivity, as well as certain personal styles are desirable and worthy. Seeing them in this way constitutes a motivation to act in a certain way. I also have a clear sense that many of my actions depend on choices and decisions I make reflexively, employing distinctions of worth. Because I recognize this in my own action, I suppose that other people act, often reflexively, on the basis of their understandings (or misunderstandings) of themselves and of the world.⁷ They too *see* (and intimately believe) that certain forms of action and subjectivity are admirable or despicable, though these may well differ from the forms I admire or despise.

In the pages that follow, I will present my synthetic interpretation of People of the Center’s—sometimes specifically Muinane’s—accounts of how the “knowledge of our own” and associated practices relate with their cosmos, social organization, subjectivities and understandings of agency. I will then turn to an examination of the moral issues pertaining to knowledge, as expressed in individuals’ morally evaluative portrayals of their own and others’ actions and agencies.

ACCOUNTS OF SELVES, THE COSMOS, AND AGENCY

Muinane people’s talk often depicted or alluded to a cosmos densely populated by a variety of suprahuman, human, and pseudo- or infrahuman agents. Such talk also segregated these beings on moral grounds. Although in some ways many had some features of humanity, only *miyámiinaha*—literally meaning “Real People” (Muinane and those akin to them)—were proper human beings with the capacity to live as such beings should.

Animals and some other kinds of beings to some extent perhaps viewed themselves as human, but failed on moral grounds to achieve true humanity. Individuals expressed this moral classification most saliently in the form of manifest evaluations of immoral action on the part of people to whom they attributed animalistic thoughts/emotions (see Londoño Sulkin 2005:7–30).

According to several *mambeadores* I asked, the ultimate purpose of human life was to reproduce “humanity”—a term that could encompass the kinship group, People of the Center, or the human species more generally. This reproduction involved the intentional manufacture of new people endowed with the sociable subjectivities and competent bodies necessary to conduct community life as it should be conducted: interacting coolly and caringly in everyday life. The constitution of individual Real People was thus a central and often explicit concern in much social action. Many standard activities in Muinane people’s lives—whether quotidian or occasional, ceremonial or not—related to this. A common premise of much of what they said and did was that people’s material constitution, by the substances that they stated made up the body, determined their subjectivities and agencies. Key cultivated substances such as tobacco, coca, hot chilies, manioc and so forth were made into human flesh through rituals and through simple consumption in everyday life; these substances, of divine origin and endowed with their own subjectivities and agencies, “spoke through” people, generating their moral thoughts/emotions and bodily sensations.

The very materiality of people’s subjectivities and agencies made them vulnerable to the evil of animals and other inhuman beings, whom my interlocutors among People of the Center often accused of placing their own perverse, subjectivity-endowing substances inside people, or otherwise impinging upon people’s bodily health. On several occasions I witnessed, when people became physically incapable of contributing to the material well-being of the community, or else behaved in antisocial fashions, others and at times they themselves would claim that this was the result of an animal’s usurpation of their thoughts/emotions, and of their speech. People’s actions were often the matter of contested interpretations, concerning whether they were proper human conduct or rather the product of the immoral, beastly usurpation of their subjectivities. Their perspectival cosmology—where beings perceive themselves and those with bodies like their own as “human”—provided a frame in which such accusations were plausible. People with animalistic subjectivities could perceive other beings who had bodies like their own as “human,” but would mistreat them in the fashion that animals and other inhuman beings mistreated

their co-specifics, whom they too perceived as “human” (see Londoño Sulkin 2005:7–30, for a more thorough discussion of Viveiros de Castro’s 1998 essay on perspectivism). In the context of communities in which such accusations were rife, people invested much in highlighting their own consistent humanity and morality, to preempt unfavorable interpretations. (For further discussion on perspectivism, see Belaunde, Lagrou, Rosengren, Santos-Granero, Storrie, and Werlang, all *intra*.)

What I interpret to be People of the Center’s understanding of their own agency—an important part of which was the capacity to manipulate substances or their bearers either materially or through persuasion—is built upon first, the premises of the materiality of moral thoughts/emotions and properly shaped bodies and of their corrupt counterparts, and second, upon the subjectivity of the bearers of these materials. This capacity stemmed from key substances such as tobacco paste, coca, hot chilies, water, herbs, and others that were agents in their own right and endowed with their own intentionality. Many of the manipulations in question were conceived as predatory transformations that involved dealing out death. Tobacco, itself a powerful predator, was perhaps the most important source of such predatory agency. In constituting people’s bodies it provided them not only with thoughts/emotions, but also with some of its predatory capabilities. Furthermore, people—mainly the *mambeadores*, but for a few purposes some women as well—used what I call instrumental “Speeches,” the Speeches of Life, of Healing, of Apprising, of Work, of Felling, of *Maloca* Construction, of Pain and others, with their protocols and conditions, to direct the agency of the tobacco they consumed so that it would prey upon evil agents and their substances, and thereby transform them with some people-making or community-making purpose (on such purposes, see Londoño Sulkin 2000:170–186 and 2001:434; and Overing and Passes 2000).

The instrumental Speeches were part of what People of the Center referred to in Spanish as *el conocimiento propio*, the “knowledge of our own.”⁸ In my experience, Muinane people used the term “knowledge of our own” mostly to contrast it with the Speeches and other privileged discourses and techniques of white men. I should note parenthetically that most Muinane men possessed some “knowledge of our own,” but by the time I did my fieldwork there were no specialized shamans alive of the kind called *kakúminaba* (sucking people), who were reportedly capable of extracting diseases from people through suction. Some Muinane people did recognize certain known Matapí, Yukuna, Uitoto, Okaina, and Makuna individuals to be specialized healers or sorcerers.⁹

The different instrumental Speeches pertained to numerous fields

of endeavour and to different moments in life. They were more or less formulaic utterances that *mambeadores* understood to act in different ways to change some aspect of the world. My interlocutors made different claims about them—that they were the very speech of the creator deity sounding directly through the speaker, or that they were “recordings” (akin to those on a cassette tape) of the Creator’s words, or that they directed the attention of the creator deity to some transformation that people wanted him (or her, depending on the clan of the person telling the story) to carry out. Alternatively the spoken utterances themselves were deemed to be powerful, or somehow able to harness the agency of substances (for a similar description of people using alternative accounts, see Tambiah 1968:183).

Real People’s transformations of misanthropic agents, their substances, their thoughts/emotions and their agencies into their proper human counterparts seemed to involve two main forms of manipulation. One was the material manipulation of substances and agents, or of substance-like agencies, thoughts/emotions and tribulations. The other form was the social manipulation of subjectivity-endowed beings, which often led to their effecting material manipulations.

The manipulation of agents and substances was often a matter of what I have called “divine performativity” (following Butler 1993:12, 13). For the case of Muinane people’s practices, I will define this as the capacity of agents to bring about transformations in the world by means of naming or otherwise describing these transformations. The effects named come to be in virtue of the will of the subject that does the naming. A common example of such divine performativity took place in most evening rituals in Muinane *mambeadores*, which usually involved the recapitulation of the evils that had affected the community that day, or that could do so on the following one. Each of these evils was then dealt with in the *mambeadores*’ rhythmic dialogues, which at some stage involved lists of statements, including metalinguistic ones about the statements’ effectiveness that affirmed that these evils were being swept away, proscribed, or blown away.¹⁰

Another form of divine performativity was the use of “naming.” *Ovikihī* (to aim), *mómonihi* (to name), and *ímijisuhi* (to name into good/beautiful), were several forms of naming that Muinane people understood to generate the effects named. An example of such performativity was the “naming of the flesh” of certain dangerous fish, transforming the fish into manioc. People understood this to transform the original substance, pre-empting its more dangerous characteristics. The fish’s pathogenic features were disarmed because processed manioc was not pathogenic.

Several of my *mambeadero* interlocutors were explicit about the fact that naming could be very dangerous, and much more so when effected by knowledgeable elders such as themselves, empowered with tobacco and coca. Immanuel broached this matter after reproaching me one time for calling an airplane a “fire eagle” (*ktíjigai mogáje*), the term that some other clans used for planes. He said, “Do not name it that way ... that is why they fall and burn! Call it *kámoga* (“canoe of the heights”).¹¹

Many salient endeavors among Muinane and other People of the Center made some use or another of this transformative, predatory agency (Echeverri 2000; Londoño Sulkin 2000 and 2001b; Overing and Passes 2000). Food and ritual substance preparations were often spoken of as filtering or purifying processes in which some agent—water, fire, or some other subjectivity-endowed substance or object—killed, destroyed, or otherwise did away with pathogens in the original stuff, leaving only a purified desirable essence. The felling and burning of the forest to make a garden was treated in the Speech of Felling as a human war against trees, or alternatively as a meal in which the deities of tobacco, axes and fire all “ate” evil trees, transforming them into fertile ashes from which desirable substances would grow. Speeches of Healing that dealt with disease usually involved the use of tobacco paste and coca, understood in the first place to be the source and power of knowledge, and then to be predators that transformed the evil substances affecting the sick and placed them again in the animals that had originated them. These animals then became easy prey for people. Finally, the building of *malocas* (traditional ceremonial and residential houses) involved numerous transformations of diseases and negative affects into elements of the house, and the “domestication” of evil agents such as the great trees that became house pillars or drums. According to *mambeadores’* metacommentaries on the Speech of *Maloca* Construction, once it transformed them into a house, these elements became protective guardians that ensured the health and fertility of the *maloca’s* inhabitants.

Such views of the cosmos and of agency within it appeared often in People of the Center’s emotional talk and moral portrayals. It always seemed to me to be an intimately persuasive account of experienced thoughts/emotions, and elsewhere I discuss in detail cases of people deeming their own and others’ behaviors to be the product of animalistic usurpation of proper human thoughts/emotions. The possibility of such usurpation contextualized claims to knowledge, morality and agency, for it was both the main object of the intentional use of knowledge, and the main claim in critiques of allegedly immoral behavior. The claims in question also seemed to me to convey the deep aesthetic involvement of

People of the Center (especially the men) with a certain picture of agency that involved on the one hand manifesting great tranquility, competent sociability and concerned care for others, and on the other a capacity for esoterically violent predatory action.

THE MORAL CONDITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

Muinane and other People of the Center's self-depictions and critiques, as well as the Speeches themselves and other discourses, tied together the morality and efficacy of individuals' uses of Speeches. One axiom I found them to express was that if Speeches were immorally transmitted, acquired, or deployed, they would not function well. If deployed in a formally correct manner and from a moral position, they would necessarily produce desirable results. Similarly, a general moral condition of knowledge was that it be used for a proper purpose, and conversely, such purpose could only be achieved if the necessary knowledge was deployed morally. However, whether a particular instance of the transmission, use or acquisition of some knowledge was moral or not was obviously a question of interpretation and at times of negotiation. In any case, people produced numerous claims to the morality of their uses of knowledge, and also many contestations of others' claims.

Ultimately, knowledge—namely, Speeches—could only be gauged as “true” (*míya-*) *a posteriori*, when it “dawned” or “made something be seen,” that is, when its effects became materially perceptible and beneficial. Several *mambeadores* affirmed that the only “true” knowledge was that which pertained to the Cool Path or Path of Life. This “path” led from the *maloca* to the garden. According to Pedro's explanation of this claim, it meant that the only worthwhile knowledge involved the production of foodstuffs and ritual substances, and through these, in the multiplication of Real People. True Speeches led to material abundance, satiety, good health, tranquil community life and demographic increase.¹²

In oft-repeated abstract accounts, a *mambeador* who had plenty of *mambe* and tobacco paste showed, by virtue of his possession of such substances, that his Speeches had “dawned” and that he was indeed a moral, knowledgeable person. Along similar lines, men and women of the Center told me on different occasions that a woman who possessed a beautiful, well-weeded garden and who always had an abundance of foodstuffs available showed that she indeed knew the counsels of the Speech of Advice and was therefore a “true woman.” In abstract accounts, the existence of well-behaved, healthy children and grandchildren was also

deemed evidence of knowledge dawning. These abstractions were often concretized in evaluations of individuals.

Pablo and other *mambeadores* stated that a person could know every counsel of the Speech of Advice or a great many Speeches of Apprising, in the sense of having consigned them to memory. But, if his knowledge did not result in well-behaved children, in the healing of diseases, or in the production of foodstuffs and ritual substances, others would claim that he did not really know, and that his Speeches were lies. So merely memorized recipes and Speeches were not in themselves true knowledge. True knowledge was that which the individual had not only committed to memory but had furthermore made dawn.

Failures to make knowledge dawn were a matter of much attention and denunciation. Jonás's was a case in point: people claimed that he was very knowledgeable of Speeches of Apprising, and that he was a pleasant man and a competent interlocutor in a *mambeadero*. Nonetheless, they also claimed that his knowledge was false, for his very lifestyle of itinerancy and material poverty showed that his beautiful Speeches had not dawned.¹³ In another instance, Jafet likened David to jaguars and anacondas, who in a certain Speech of Apprising appeared as leaders whose Speeches sounded beautiful, but were mere false appearance. They did not dawn, but instead led to death, hunger, and other tribulations for their people.

If moral knowledge pertained to the Cool Path, and in general to the production of Real People, its spurious counterpart was sorcery. Sorcery was dangerous, immoral knowledge that led to the destruction of people and communities, but it also pleased those who lacked discernment because of its great destructive efficacy. Saul told me a certain part of a Speech of Apprising that stressed the clear contrast between proper knowledge and sorcery. It followed a moral self-portrayal in which he claimed to reject sorcery. The Apprising went something like this:

At First Time, some animals claimed that the creator's True Speech was not true. They preferred to explore sorcerous knowledge, and collected substances for sorcery. Soon, however, they found themselves hungry and incapable of producing food. They sought the creator to beg him for manioc and other garden produce. He told them, "Eat your sorcery stones!" They answered, "Those stones do not bring satiety!" "Then why do you use them at all?!" he demanded angrily, and then condemned them to a miserable life of scavenging and eating filth, and to be game animals for Real People to eat.

Again, this mythical event highlighted that the proper use of knowledge was for production that led to satiety—a state of cool satisfaction—and derogated its misuse for the purposes of sorcery. Sorcery did produce

results, but these were ultimately detrimental to the user.

Whether a certain use of knowledge was moral or sorcerous was not always clear. As with other moral aspects of knowledge, it was in fact a matter open to contestation. For instance, whereas Immanuel found that his use of his animal tooth-and-claw necklace in predatory healing rites was the irreproachable harnessing of evil agents he himself had domesticated (and thus moralized), Pedro and Pablo found it to be trafficking with evil agents, and therefore to be sorcerous. They liked Immanuel well enough, but stated that the day would come when the beings of the necklace would kill him.

There was an almost standardized autobiographical anecdote among Muinane men concerning their rejection of sorcery. I heard independent versions from Immanuel and Saul, and then from several young Uitoto and Muinane men. They told me about their ignorant and innocent youth, when they had been interested in acquiring sorcerous knowledge with which to harm enemies, or in hearing about it. Each had asked his father or some other elder about this. The wiser elder had advised each overly eager youth against such deadly interests, which led to no production. In each case, the elder had instructed the youth to “look at where those who used sorcery ended up.” Invariably, in the myths and histories alluded to, sorcerers had died awful deaths and their lineages had come to tragic ends. I am not sure that these pedagogical events actually transpired in each of their personal histories. Rather, I believe that oft-repeated stories such as this one, which involved interactions between stereotypical characters (e.g., overly eager and ignorant youths and wise elders) reiterated key contrasts and associations of a vocabulary of moral evaluations central to people’s accounts of themselves. Their frequent repetition and their moral plausibility made them an intimate part of their lives. What was important about them, after all, was that they were moral truths.¹⁴

The self-portrayals and criticisms of People of the Center concerning knowledge very often highlighted one or several other moral and aesthetic considerations. Such considerations were often premised on the agential character of the Speeches, which were understood to be prone to anger, disgust, jealousy, and sulking when mistreated. In such cases, “morality” was a matter of treating an agent respectfully, for instrumental purposes. In other cases, though, people’s portrayals highlighted their own coolness, benevolence, discipline, and correctness in matters of knowledge, and bracketed the intrinsic agency of the Speeches.

The formal correctness of deployments of knowledge was always a salient consideration. There was much rhetoric about the requirement of using Speeches only when needed, and in the correct place, at the right

time, and with the appropriate accoutrements. The claims could posit that the Speeches themselves required it, as agents, or else they could simply highlight the virtuous orthodoxy of the person. One formal requirement of many Speeches was that they be deployed in the form of dialogues. Individuals often emitted judgments of particular instances of speech deployment, or of their own and others' talents in this regard. Pablo, for instance, told me his son lacked the ability to "give him strength" in dialogue. I witnessed one dialogue between them and found that, indeed, the son lacked expertise as a what-sayer, because he merely answered his father with "hmmms" rather than with the more varied repertoire of responses of an experienced interlocutor. This lack of skill constituted an aesthetic problem, but it had implications concerning the efficacy of the Speeches deployed, as well as the public evaluation of Pablo and of his son. People spoke critically about them, saying that Pablo had not raised his children properly in that regard, and that his son had not been attentive to the ways of the clan.

Another common moral claim of individuals was that they had acquired their knowledge properly: from the right elders, in correct circumstances, following the proper protocols, and so on. Moral obligations concerning transmission went both ways. Since the Speeches themselves were sentient beings and were tied to agential substances, their transmission and acquisition required care. Knowledge transmitted inappropriately could attack either giver or receiver, or simply sulk and cease to work. For instance, Speeches could become resentful if not properly paid for with tobacco, and could harm their original owner for not treating them as something dear to him. Knowledge acquired too quickly and in excess could madden receivers, and it was the obligation of concerned elders to make sure they did not give others Speeches carelessly. (See Overing 1993:191–211; and Lagrou *intra*, on the dangers of excess among the Piaroa and Kaxinawa respectively).

People of the Center also made much of the ownership of knowledge. Such ownership was linked to the very nature of groupings and individuals, as represented in Speeches of Apprising, and in much other rhetoric as well. The idea was that the Grandfather of Creation had created the different patriline, clans, and language groups in different ways, and had given to each its strain of tobacco and its Speeches. These Speeches were transmitted patrilineally, in the case of tobacco *constituting* the very bodies of members of patriline and clans, who were thus consubstantial among themselves and therefore supposedly similar in subjectivities, proclivities, and vulnerabilities. Therefore, though many Speeches and rituals were the same between different groups, some were unique to particular lineages and

clans because they addressed unique aspects of lineage-specific creation and bodily constitution. Ignoring such knowledge, or preferring another group's knowledge, were dangerous matters that could generate trouble or criticism for the unorthodox. Immanuel, for instance, once told me he had followed proper Muinane protocols when bringing his wooden drum into the *maloca*, while his own father had unwisely had his brought in, many years before, following a Uitoto rather than Muinane protocol.

ON THE DESIRE FOR PREDATORY AGENCY

People of the Center's accounts of the nature of agency in the cosmos were linked to their inevitable ambivalence towards violence, hate, and anger. The latter were often mentioned as the most salient manifestations of animal thoughts/emotions. These emotions were the object of many abstract prescriptions that warned against their capacity to destroy life and relationships, and were likely to be harshly criticized when actually made manifest. Nonetheless, men in particular seemed to be obsessed with the idea of being capable of angrily killing, harming, scolding, or proscribing evil or threatening agents in the world (whether anthropomorphic or not). Their expressions of this ranged from (1) David's and Abel's numerous reports about having scolded this or that person, through (2) the light-hearted bravado of Lázaro's youngest son, a youth of seventeen or so, who addressed a bolt of lightning by saying to an audience of a boatful of brothers, sisters, and myself: "You try that again and I'll grab you by the tail!" to (3) claims of Immanuel's that seemed to require greater commitment to the suspension of disbelief. He often produced Speeches to disarm thunder, and once, when I asked him why vampires killed his chickens but would not bite those of us who lived in his *maloca*, he said: "Do you think that I would allow them to live, if they did that? They are afraid!"

I believe part of the reason for their ambivalence lay in the predatory nature of agency as they understood and valued it. To be moral human beings and men of knowledge, men not only had to be cool and sociable, they also had to prey upon evil agential beings in the world, beings with whom some interlocution was possible. However, the powers that made them dangerous to evil beings were also capable of harming them and other innocent human beings.¹⁵

Such was the interest of a few individuals in dangerous agency or in portraying themselves as dangerously agential, that some would admit to knowledge of sorcery. Onan once told me that he pitied anyone who would try to ensorcell him or his people, explaining that it was easy for

him or anyone who knew good Speeches to “flip them over” and turn them into sorcerous spells that sickened or killed human victims. Pedro and his brothers would probably have deemed such interest and claims to manifest an immoral constitution, something Onan knew well. I see such claims rather as privileging the ideal of being an agent capable of dealing effectively with outside threats, and in Onan’s case, as an intentional portrayal of himself as capable of great esoteric violence.

Onan’s father Saul once expressed to me his interest in developing a new capacity to harm people through esoteric knowledge. He had heard about a practice (I imagine it was Vodou) that involved using pictures of victims in order to hurt them, and he wanted me to teach him this skill. I do not recall my immediate reaction, but he quickly added that he would not use it to ensorcell people, only for defense. Subsequent events persuaded me that he had a certain human target in mind. I believe he knew that this would be deemed sorcery by some of his fellow Muinane *mambeadores*, but also that he really desired an efficacious, death-dealing capability, even one as redolent of sorcery as the one in question.¹⁶

A MORAL EXEMPLAR

One of the most seductive ideals of masculine agency among People of the Center and some neighbouring groups was reified in the image of the knowledgeable *mambeador*, seated in an unwavering posture, “rooted” in his place, attending single-mindedly to moral, esoteric matters in the *mambeadero* and effectively defending himself and his people from evil.¹⁷ For the *mambeadero* was indeed the place *par excellence* for the deployment of knowledge. It was from a seated position in this circle of seats that a man’s Speeches were best buttressed and empowered by the tobacco and other substances of his lineage, by the agencies consigned in the very makings of his *maloca*, and by his kin. Moreover, some Speeches could only be produced (at night) in the *mambeadero* of the *maloca* of a member of the patriline to which those Speeches belonged.

In talking about “sitting firmly,” several *mambeadores* brought into account a connection between a *mambeador*’s life process and the tobacco plant’s. Both started life as vulnerable beings. The tender young tobacco plant that first sprouted from the ground was still so fragile and loose that any breeze could uproot it. Similarly, a boy or recently initiated youth could easily be swayed from the “path” of proper development and become flitting, undisciplined, weak, and inconstant. With time and proper care, however, both the *mambeador* and the tobacco matured. Mature tobacco

had deep, strong roots that no wind could uproot. The Nonuya man who best explained this to me spoke admiringly about the mature *mambeador*, who had a tobacco “tree” rooted in his abdomen. It was this tobacco tree that kept him firmly rooted at the moral center of his world, the *mambeadero*. Such a man featured a keen awareness of propriety and impropriety, and had the strength, the control, and the presence of mind to reject all temptation to misbehave and violate the prescriptions of his forefathers. He recognized what knowledge belonged to him and his people, and what belonged to others. Unlike a flitting youth, the “wind” of others’ knowledge did not unseat him or seduce him into forgetting his own. Furthermore, in the process of aging and transforming into paste as described in Speeches of Apprising, tobacco becomes an unstoppable predator that can destroy all enemies. Ideally, this is also true of men.

That men and women found the highly aesthetic picture of a man sitting firmly in a *mambeadero* to be an ideal of agency seemed to me to be evident as well in their use of the term “to sit” as a common metonym to refer to a person’s—a man’s, but also sometimes a woman’s—judicious reaction to important challenges. Numerous times I witnessed speakers producing a certain gesture to accompany this metonymic reference. They would half-sit in an imaginary seat as if with elbows solidly planted on their knees or thighs, hands close to but not touching their heads. They would tighten their arm muscles in a quick, visible gesture. This produced a recognizable semblance of a *mambeador*.

The persuasiveness of this image—its promise of agency and morality—buttressed, and was in turn buttressed by, its association with rhetoric about and practices of virilocal postmarital residence, patrilineal corporativity and, for Muinane people, if not other People of the Center, the patrilineal inflection of their kinship terminology.

I recall an instance when a Yukuna woman who happened to live in a Muinane community told David that since he was a traditional leader, he ought to stop traveling to meetings in other communities and cities, and to sit. She protested that he was no longer a young man to be traipsing around. His task now was to sit and to guard his people from within the *mambeadero*. David was deeply offended by this, though he himself had requested that all who had criticisms produce them right there, rather than in his absence. He retorted that his community was thankless, and that he had nobody trustworthy to send off to meetings, or even worthy interlocutors.

Immanuel’s brother Aurelio provided me with a nice description of a stereotypical man of knowledge, which reiterated as well the association

between agency, masculinity and the *mambeadero*: “That man may speak as if scolding, but it is only from the throat outwards. Inside, he has a calm, a love ... One hears him conversing pleasantly in the *mambeadero*, sometimes joking, with enthusiasm ... but that very man can say “*Dáigéjítiraana!*” (Do not rain!), and the rain stops.” This anecdote cited an ideal of masculine agency that featured a combination of sociability and benevolence with great esoteric capability.

QUOTING OTHERS IN CLAIMS TO KNOWLEDGE

Many of the self-portrayals individual People of the Center produced described the speaker with quoted evaluations by third parties. These descriptions showed me that people were attentive to others’ views of them, or at least that positing third person views to describe or account for themselves was acceptable (see Oakdale 2005). There was much else in their everyday talk that indicated that they were keenly attentive to others’ perceptions and judgments of them. The call for such attentiveness was even formulaic in the Speech of Advice, where many counsels warned youths that if they behaved in certain ways, others would criticize, ask who of their kin raised them so carelessly, and so on. Furthermore, people were explicitly aware of the barrage of critical commentary constantly going on in their own and neighbouring communities.

Caleb, a Uitoto man married to a Muinane woman, proffered a particularly nice example of a self-portrayal in which the speaker quoted another’s evaluation of him. However, his self-portrayal had an interesting twist. The character who portrayed Caleb as knowledgeable, and whose voice he animated, was the spirit of a dead man with whom Caleb said he had spoken in a *yagé* vision.

On the occasion in question, Caleb, speaking in Spanish, told several of us seated with him in the *mambeadero* about discovering that it had been his now dead uncle Nimrod who had ensorcelled and thereby killed many people in the region in previous years. Caleb said his mother had prepared *yagé* for him and that upon drinking it he had had ugly, unpleasant visions. Nonetheless, in his vision he had arrived at his uncle’s *mambeadero*, and had seen the uncle surrounded by paraphernalia for sorcery. “It is you, uncle!” Caleb claimed he had said, a phrase that was both a standard greeting and an accusatory statement. He described how his uncle had looked at him and said, “I, who remained undiscovered by elders and men of knowledge, am now discovered by a mere orphan!” I understood Nimrod’s

contribution, as acted out by Caleb, to express a mix of irritation, surprise, and admiration.

Here, Caleb was making a claim to esoteric perspicacity and superior knowledge. *Yagé* was widely deemed in the region to have an all-revealing character, for supposedly drinkers could “see everything.” They could see through the flesh of individuals and identify sorcerous pathogenic objects placed in their bodies. They could witness past and future events, including sorcerous rituals, and nothing they chose to look into would remain a mystery. However, they also stated that great sorcerers could escape lesser people’s sight. Only somebody (usually an old man) well versed in the esoteric and with great knowledge could “catch” a reportedly able sorcerer like Nimrod. However, Caleb cited a fairly commonly used image that sometimes subverted the emphasis on age as a condition of wisdom: that of the orphan. Orphans, bereft of kin, unprotected, without mentors focusing on them, nonetheless appeared in some Speeches of Apprising¹⁸ as uniquely capable sages who became knowledgeable and agential while listening to others’ stories and doing their menial jobs, and who surged from anonymity and low status to achieve great things. Caleb was not literally an orphan, in the sense that he did have a father. However, his father’s patriline’s elders had been murdered before he could learn from them, and so in that sense he had been orphaned of his patriline’s knowledge. By claiming to be an orphan, I think, Caleb was modeling himself after the image of somebody who would surprise others by acquiring skills and agency beyond what would be expected of him. That it had been a very knowledgeable, if evil, old man who had purportedly described Caleb this way (when Caleb discovered him), as opposed to it being merely Caleb’s own claim, constituted stronger evidence of his agency. I am persuaded that he wanted to be related to as such an agent.

ON THE EFFECTS OF MORAL SELF-PORTRAYALS

Let me briefly consider some of the effects actual moral self-portrayals actually have, or might have, on social life. A final anecdote will help me do so.

Lazarus was telling me that Abel, a young man from another clan, had once sat with him in his *mambeadero*:

He (Abel) said to me (Lazarus): “*Yo ya tengo mando* [I already have power].” He always *aplasta* [flattens, causes to capitulate or be silent] Pedro and Pablo, and all they say to him is “*Ímimo* [“Good” or “all right,” in Muinane] ... but that day I blocked him. I asked him, “And who gave you that power?” He

said that Saul, Methuselah, Immanuel and Lot. So I said to him, "So let's see, where is it? Where is that of which you speak?" He did not have anything to show, so I said, "One should never say that if one has nothing to show... and less so to me, who just had to give you coca and tobacco paste because you have none of your own." Then I said to him, "Never again talk to me thus, saying trash like that." He said that I was right, and that he had learned an important point that day. So then I said, "What if I were to ask you to heal that boy there?" Benjamin [a baby] was sick that day, trembling. "Do you know how to stop that?" He said "No." So where does that leave you, if somebody requests that you do so?¹⁹

Abel had made a claim to knowledge and agency, and Lazarus had treated it as outrageous in the circumstances, highlighting that Abel did not even have tobacco paste or coca to produce as evidence and support for his claim. As told by Lazarus, he also provided further warning of future shame to Abel, should he not be able to heal a child when requested to do so by others who heard his bragging. Lazarus achieved several things through this anecdote. First, he reproduced an image of agential knowledge that featured production and healing as its central purposes, and the premise that there was a certain kind of evidence for such knowledge. Second, he made what I believe was his intended point, namely, that he himself was a tough and capable *mambeador* with the material evidence to back this up, and that he had taught a young upstart a lesson.²⁰ Abel's own words, directly or indirectly quoted, were "evidence" that this was not just Lazarus's account but also Abel's perception. Third, he contributed to the maintenance of the footings of our relationship. Lazarus was my host at the time, and frequently pressed upon me that he was a man of knowledge. As usual, I listened to his anecdotes with interest and responded in what I believed to be the preferred fashion. In this case, I expressed satisfaction upon hearing about Abel being put in his place (I was sincerely delighted). I treated him in such a way that it was clear that I accepted his character as a man of knowledge. Between Lazarus's claims and questions and my own, we managed to be on excellent footing.

In contrast to Lazarus's successful claims, and through the refraction of Lazarus's account, Abel's own moral self-portrayal to the effect that he "had power" appears to me to have been infelicitous, for Lazarus not only did not accept Abel's statement, but strongly refused the egalitarian footings that Abel's tone and claim would seem to have tried to posit and enact. This was also an example—though a rather franker one than usual—of the kind of contestation of knowledge that People of the Center know to be likely.

Anecdotes such as Lazarus's (and Abel's purported one) cite, and

depend upon, local accounts of human ontogeny, competence, and subjectivity for their intelligibility. Thus, one of the effects was that Lazarus and Abel made their accounts and symbolic associations available anew to others, including me, for interpretation, citation, transformation, or rejection. Furthermore, they provided listeners and interlocutors with a frame for the interpretation of speakers' actions. In this sense they could be "felicitous" occurrences, such as when listeners accepted the anecdotes and were willing to interpret other actions of the speakers in their light, or they could be "infelicitous," such as when both speakers' telling of the anecdotes and other actions they performed were taken to be manifestations of some undesirable feature of the speakers, and when the respondents contested the self-portrayal. Finally, these self-portrayals and critiques, like most other uses of language, were parts of dialogues that set, maintained, or changed the tone of interactions and the footings of relationships.

DISCUSSION

This essay is the product of my curiosity about the striking number of moral portrayals and critiques that individuals among People of the Center produced concerning matters of knowledge. My initial claim was that they were motivated by a certain ideal of agency, a sense of what was admirable or desirable in human subjectivity and action, and by awareness of the possibility that their actions and subjectivities could be framed as immoral, animalistic, or otherwise inadequate by others around them. This was a gendered ideal of agency. On the one hand there was the complex image of the "true man" (*imíyagaifi*), a man of knowledge, tied to his patriline and to its land, and capable of contributing to the proper course of everyday life there, be it through his own sociable action or through dangerous predatory knowledge and esoteric violence. On the other hand (which I did not explore here) there was the "true woman" (*imíyagaigo*): hard-working, conscientious, generous, caring, and faithful. Both men and women tended to help reproduce these ideals, for both genders. (On differences in gendered agencies, see Belaunde, *intra*.)

To make my initial claim plausible, I discussed several matters: Muinane accounts of agency—of thoughts/emotions and action—in the cosmos, the coherence of which I believe contributed to their compelling character; Muinane people's attentiveness to and awareness of other's perceptions and evaluations of their subjectivities and actions; instances of talk that suggest an intent to persuade others of speakers' knowledge and agency; and the possible effects of such instances of talk.

Part of what makes this claim plausible for me is that I find some moral self-portrayals of People of the Center as akin, in a limited sense, to the ostentatious manly gesturing I remember deploying in my own society. I remember instances in my adolescence when I intentionally and reflexively produced a certain style of walking, talking, or otherwise interacting with others, in situations when I suspected that I would otherwise not be perceived in a manner that fit in with what I aspired to be. I also recognized that other individuals did the same. We self-consciously chose forms of ostentatious expression that “corresponded” to our aspired ideal of manliness—an ideal that also fits into a more or less coherent cosmos. I have the sense that others also may have questioned individuals’ manliness, or deemed their “manly” gestures phony or contrived, but “manliness” itself as a norm or ideal was only rarely questioned. It was usually taken for granted as a feature of agents in a certain kind of world. As I understand it, the ideal and value of manliness in question was itself a social achievement, the processual product of people’s reiterations of the forms that constitute manliness.²¹

The talk about knowledge and practices of knowledge engaged in by Muinane people made sense in the context of a certain kind of world, a coherent one in which the nature of embodied selfhood was tied to that of livelihood practices, and these to moral action, and all of these to the character of inter- and intraspecific relations in the cosmos, and in turn to the workings of great rituals. Theirs was a world populated by different kinds of beings who interrelated in certain ways, and where people’s bodies were constituted by different substances that determined their identity, their subjectivity, their actions, and, in general, their agency. In that world, people were axiomatically moral. However, outside agents—animals and other morally inhuman beings—could impinge upon them and cause them to experience and manifest immoral subjectivities, in fact extracting them from the category of Real People. Through rituals—small everyday rituals, or occasional great ones—Real People were made, shaped, healed, or reconstituted, to ensure their health and sociability.

Muinane people’s talk about, and practice of, knowledge and the world, translated into persuasive, plausible, self-referring accounts of phenomenological experience—of thoughts/emotions and motivations—and had a strong hold on them. It also shaped their grasp of agency, defining a sense of who they and others around them could and should be, including a sense of what was manly (or properly womanly), admirable, and dignified action, and thus how they could and should act. People used the terms of such talk to construe their circumstances, interactions, and identities, and to interpret their own subjectivities. I witnessed situations

when people talked about their own past thoughts/emotions and actions, basically persuaded that these had not been their own but rather stemmed from extrinsic beings and substances. In some cases, this seemed to have led them to change their view of themselves and of significant others, and to act on the basis of this new perception.

Their images of desirable agency had implications to much in everyday life in Muinane communities, including aspects of practice typically considered as subject matter for anthropology, such as social organization. Muinane and Uitoto men tended to live in communities that were mostly corporate patrilineal, but sometimes they did not. A rich description of their social organizational patterns would require attention to the motivations and self-conscious choices of individuals who created these patterns. For instance, the ideal of rootedness, of being tied to a patriline and its land, seemed to have been an important consideration for some men when deciding not to leave the settlement where they lived with their brothers, and where there was much unpleasant conflict.

Much of the talk of People of the Center showed that they were attentive to others' evaluations of behavior, and a few times I heard people refer explicitly to the critical commentary that was rife in their communities. Thus, they were aware of the likelihood that they themselves would be targeted and that their expressions of knowledge or claims were unlikely to be taken at face value by all and accepted as true. Contestations, private or open, were likely. In this context—seeking to be and/or appearing to be specimens of an ideal of moral agency, and in order to preempt contrary interpretations of their actions and subjectivities—People of the Center were called upon and motivated to produce talk and other ostentatious manifestations of knowledge and morality. They did so in order to persuade others and to achieve certain effects. I am of the opinion that this was often the situation that led individuals to produce moral self-portrayals.

NOTES

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1. Uitoto, Muinane, Andoke, Ocaina, Bora, Miraña and Nonuya-speaking patrilineal clans of the Caquetá-Putumayo river area of Colombia. See Espinosa

Arango (1995:304); Echeverri (1997:2); Karadimas (1997); Griffiths (1998); and Londoño Sulkin (2001, 2004).

2. The concern in question is something I picked up from Joanna Overing when I was her student. It was then reinforced over the years as I realized, again and again, how perspicacious and appropriate her emphasis on morality was when attending to Amazonian (and other) people's social lives. It seems clear to me that her interest in matters of morality is one of her most salient legacies and the most consistently shared feature in the work of her students and admirers in this volume.

3. *Mambe* was the Spanish term for a mix of toasted and powdered coca leaves and the ashes of *Cecropia* leaves. The verbal form was *mambear*, and this was done by packing the green powder into the cheeks and keeping it there for slow absorption. The main, but not only, place for coca consumption was the *mambeadero*, a circle of seats situated somewhere inside the *maloca*.

4. According to Conklin (2001:38), writing about Wari' people, "The biggest control on individual behavior is acute sensitivity to public opinion and criticism." See also Basso (1995:29).

5. I follow Charles Taylor's use of the term to refer to "distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth and things which lack this or are of lesser value" (Taylor 1985:3).

6. I must note, however, that these pictures did not constitute an exhaustive, monolithic culture. People sometimes spoke in different terms about these matters.

7. I am attending here to Cohen's (1994:5, 6) and Overing and Passes' (2000) call for attention to individual consciousness, and to Taylor's (1985:294) arguments to the effect that human beings are self-interpreting animals whose interpretations involve qualitative distinctions of worth.

8. The Spanish term "*conocimiento propio*" has no simple translation in Muinane. However, the linguist Consuelo Vengoechea (personal communication) refers to it as "*Ifásitu*," following an informant's statement. I understand that Muinane term merely to mean "all parts" or "the whole thing," and not to be a univocal name for the category of knowledge. Vengoechea (1995) has carried out research on the Muinane language (see also Landaburu 1996).

9. Both men and women stressed that women did not have the "capacity" for *conocimiento propio*—they found it not to suit women's bodily constitution, and vice versa.

10. See Echeverri's (1997:250) excellent example of a performative discourse among the Uitoto (without using the term "performative," though). See also Griffiths (1998:72, 206) for other similar rites among Uitoto. Tambiah's (1968:190–193) lists of phrases and words for gardening magic in Melanesia is very similar to People of the Center's.

11. The title of my piece "Though It Comes as Evil, I Embrace It as Good ..." (Londoño Sulkin 2000:170–186) is a Muinane aphorism that refers to the desirability of "naming" the poisonous, the tragic, the undesirable, the disgusting, and so on, into their "good" counterparts.

12. Cf. Santos-Granero (1991:12) and Echeverri (1997:195) on the moral

use of knowledge among Yanesha and Uitoto people respectively.

13. Beauty can be a manifestation of morality, or else mere appearance, with no real substance behind it to guarantee its moral results. Cf. Overing (1985a:284).

14. Cf. Overing (1985b:167–169) on “truth” and moral coherence and correctness.

15. There is an excellent discussion of a similar existential problem among the Piaroa, in Overing (2006).

16. On the near identity of sorcerous and benevolent shamanism, see Santos-Granero (1991:338); Vidal and Whitehead (2004:67, 76); and Wright (2004:83).

17. Cf. Griffiths (1998:163) on the concept of “sitting firmly” among the Uitoto, and Belaunde (1992:103) on the Peruvian Airo-Pai’s valuation of “erectness of posture” as a manifestation of moral personal disposition. Alès (2000:133–151) discusses both “sitting” and “standing” as matters of attention among the Yanomami.

18. The Uitoto term for the stories that Muinane people call “Speeches of Apprising” is “Ropes of the Ancients” (Echeverri, personal communication).

19. This is an excerpt from my diary, and not of a recorded and transcribed conversation.

20. I do not mean to posit that language *carries* meaning. Rather, I wish to say that we deploy language with intent, and others make their own meanings out of it. I do think people converge somewhat in their interpretations, though differences are undeniable.

21. My argument here is inspired by Butler (1993:288).

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