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## Merits and Motivations of an Ashéninka Leader

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# Merits and Motivations of an Ashéninka Leader

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## INTRODUCTION

Life history studies—often imagined as empirical doorways to the “ethos” of specific cultures—have been a legitimate part of fieldwork methodology for as long as anthropology has been an academic profession (Langness and Frank 2001). Other disciplines (including history, sociology, cultural studies, and psychology) have embraced life history studies for their own purposes. Historians were among the first to appreciate the importance of personal reminiscence as historical evidence (Prins 2001), and social scientists find that autobiographical and biographical methods provide “a sophisticated stock of interpretive procedures for relating the personal and the social” (Chamberlayne et al. 2000:2). Common among the range of approaches to life histories is an idea that they offer privileged windows into culture, history, the human psyche, or into the conditions of human action. Nevertheless, Peacock and Holland found more than a decade ago that life history studies were “poorly integrated with the larger endeavor of ... description, analysis, and theory,” thus warranting their being reframed and theorized again (1993:367). They also noted that many studies have tended to see life histories as complete reflections of an external reality—whether situated in the human psyche, in culture, in society, or in history—a reality that constituted the “real” object of study. Seen as a medium for grasping this “reality,” the narrative itself, or its relation to the context of narration, has been secondary.

With the antiessentialist “turn” in late twentieth-century anthropology, this is changing. The bulk of more recent approaches—varied and complex as they are—tend to go beyond the narrow and rather static views of previous epistemologies. As Peacock and Holland observe, these new approaches “situate the life story in processes crucial to human life: collective meaning systems and their dynamics, self-other communication and discovery, social relations and the formation of sociality, or self-formation” (1993:373). Such approaches in which “life stories” are not valued solely on the basis of how well they mirror some reality external

to the narrative, are conducive to a multidimensional appreciation of the power of biographical and autobiographical narrative in diverse processes of social construction. Life history allows for a perception of the individual subjects—storytellers and social beings—as both creative and created in their relations to others.

In this vein, the process of telling life stories is widely recognized for its therapeutic value, as is most clearly apparent in institutionalized settings (e.g., at Alcoholics Anonymous, group psychotherapy sessions, etc.). Storytelling helps to reclaim a sense that the protagonists have some say in the way their lives unfold. For the narrator in such settings, as Michael Jackson phrases it, storytelling is “a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances” (2002:15). Taking inspiration from Hannah Arendt, Jackson stresses storytelling as an important bridge between private and public realms, and between the individual and the collectivity. In this way, he highlights the double-sidedness of autobiographical storytelling as both a sort of confession and a social act in which stories are shared and come to carry meaning beyond the personal. Yet, with such a strong focus on the therapeutics in storytelling that enables the marginalized “to create ‘necessary illusions’ without which life becomes insupportable” (Jackson 2002:26), this approach fails to account for the power of storytelling when positions other than that of the victim are voiced by the narrator. In “empowered” contexts, autobiographical narratives indeed turn into means, or even effects, of strategic positioning. They provide definitions of situations and encode models for action rather than supply illusions to live by. Storytelling thus helps to establish agency, creating itself as imaginable and effective. Empirically, a clear distinction between stories as illusions of empowerment and as models for action may be hard to draw, but, for purposes of analysis, the difference may be helpful.

One additional obstacle may impede anthropological work on life history narratives from moving beyond a focus on their role in coping with positions of disempowerment. Centering on the individual, life history work in anthropology converges on, but tries to differentiate itself from, the popular biography genre that focuses on heads of state, “great” men or women, superstars, and common celebrities—whether they are heroes or villains, royalty or spin-doctored politicians, or even the human products of commercial branding strategies. This model is not where most anthropologists look for the subjects of their informant biographies and life histories. Rather, anthropologists tend to shy away from heromaking and from individualization of subjects in their writings. While this is normally a healthy disposition on the part of the ethnographer, it does tend to ignore

the fact that in certain situations specific informants may actually rate the heroism they claim (or do not claim, as the case may be). My comments are not meant to advocate a shift to contemporary celebrity memoirs or to the heroic texts of nineteenth-century historians. Rather, I want to create an informed understanding of the role of talented leaders and the power of autobiographical storytelling in ethnography. Both are understood by me to be a part of a politics of liberation. My focus is the way such leaders act politically across conflicting cultural forms and political systems, effecting in the process a vision of ethical and practical ethnographic texts.

Working from an ontological assumption that individuals can make a difference and that they may be effective agents, life history (and more precisely the autobiographical narrative) needs to be seen as aligned with history, authenticity and reflection. It must also be concerned with the present, with subjectivity, invention, representation, and fabrication. I use the term “autobiographical narrative” here to refer to accounts that do not cover a person’s entire life, as life histories do, but cover shorter episodes within this span.<sup>1</sup> Autobiographical narratives, even if indissolubly linked with an actual verifiable past, are the products of signifying processes that are associated with the present, with hopes and dreams, and with the production of meaning. In this sense, the autobiographical narrative is a complex product involving both the representation of lived experience and the ability of the storyteller to seize the opportunity for transformative impulse.

In this essay I discuss some possible interpretations of an autobiographical narrative I collected in 1987 from Miguel Camaiteri, a man who was a shrewd organizer and unusually talented leader. I wanted to determine how he understood his own political role among the Pajonal Ashéninka, an indigenous population in one of Peru’s more isolated Amazon regions.<sup>2</sup> A central theme in the personal story he presented in 1987, a theme to which he returned time and again, concerned his motivations for becoming an activist.

Miguel’s 1987 account self-consciously paints a picture of an idealistic, goal-oriented person, who witnessed recurrent injustices as a child and decided as an adult that he would return to liberate his people. His story is episodic. It recounts a number of his feats of organizing the Pajonal Ashéninka. Miguel also explains some of the personal sacrifices he made to attain this goal. It is the “career” story of a hero. To an outsider and, undoubtedly, to Miguel himself, the narrative appears plausible and true at first glance. Yet, upon closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that the details do not support a picture of ideal-driven heroism. Rather, the story reveals an energetic and pragmatic person, with a talent for opportunistically

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responding to and influencing unfolding events beyond his making. What heroism exists emerges as an ex post facto rationalization, as does the goal itself. This may be the case with all heroes and heroism. However, reading Miguel Camaiteri's narrative in concert with information about his life and his actions—derived from other sources, including my own field notes, and my knowledge of him as a person—alternative interpretations emerge. These alternative interpretations are probably no more nor less “true” than the heroic version of the story as told by Miguel. However, taken together they offer a different perspective on Miguel's accomplishments and motivations. They also offer an understanding of how his presentation of himself depends on his own political agenda at the time he tells the story. Such a contextualized interpretation may reveal his actions to be crucial to the improvement of the lot of his people. His narrative expresses his sense of agency, not as a solitary man standing alone, but as someone who envisions and emphasizes collective goals. Through this emphasis on the collective, Miguel's narrative challenges notions of the impending breakdown of indigenous solidarity in the face of modernization. As such, the narrative forges self-confident indigenous identity while speaking “truth to power.”

## THE PAJONAL ASHÉNINKA AND THE SETTLERS

Approximately 6,000 Pajonal Ashéninka live in small settlements scattered over 3,600 square kilometers of dense rainforest and grasslands known as the Gran Pajonal, a *montaña* region between the Ucayali river and the far eastern slopes of the Andes. They form a subgroup of the larger Arawakan population formerly known in the ethnographic literature as Campa and today referred to by their autodenominations Ashéninka and Asháninka (Hvalkof and Veber 2005). Numbering more than 80,000 people in the Upper Amazon of central Peru, known as *La Selva Central*, these populations find themselves in varying degrees of socioeconomic involvement with national society. The Pajonal Ashéninka are on the lesser integrated end of the continuum.

The Gran Pajonal is a difficult region to access. It was brought under the purview of the Peruvian government only in the late 1930s, when the Franciscan Mission set up the small colony called Oventeni in the center of Gran Pajonal region. From then on, the Ashéninka—who hunt, gather, and engage in horticulture—gradually found their best lands taken over by settlers who were mostly immigrants from the Andean highlands. Along with settlers came lethal epidemics that took a heavy toll on the Ashéninka

population. Yet, the decline was soon reversed thanks to vaccination campaigns initiated in the 1970s by American missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) who worked in the area. From an estimated low of 1,500 persons in 1969 (Bodley 1971), the population had multiplied to approximately 4,000 by 1985 (Hvalkof 1989).

By the 1970s, serious conflicts had developed between settlers and the native Ashéninka. The Ashéninka needed their land for subsistence and for the development of cash crops, while ambitious settlers wanted to expand the cattle-ranching schemes in which they had invested money and effort.<sup>3</sup> These settlers had no intention of letting a few ragtag natives stop them from making their dreams of wealth come true. Yet, settlers depended on Ashéninka labor for clearing fields and planting pastures, and they were accustomed to securing this labor at very low costs.<sup>4</sup>

The Ashéninka were aware that along with land, education was central to their hope for a better future. With their limited knowledge of Spanish, and without the ability to read, write, or perform simple arithmetic, they would never be able to secure control of the territories on which they subsisted. In the absence of such skills, they would never receive fair prices for the crops they wanted to market.

Over the years, Oventeni settlers had actively resisted Ashéninka efforts to improve their lot. By the early 1980s, the Ashéninka were becoming aware that they needed to act collectively to change the situation. With support from SIL missionaries,<sup>5</sup> some local headmen managed to set up bilingual schools in a few local settlements. They had also started to organize themselves into *comunidades nativas* (native communities), legal entities that by Peruvian law allow groups of Amazonian natives to be formally recognized as separate populations with rights to territory and the management of their own internal affairs. This organizational process was an ongoing concern for the Ashéninka when I arrived in Oventeni in November 1985 to do ethnographic fieldwork.<sup>6</sup>

To learn about indigenous life and relations between settlers and Ashéninka, my husband and I stayed in different Ashéninka settlements and in Oventeni, observing interactions between the two groups and listening to complaints from indigenous persons that they were not being paid for work they had done for settlers, that their crops were cut down and their fields taken over by settlers, and that they were being threatened and abused by settlers by being evicted from their homes and cheated when they sold their harvest of coffee to settler buyers. I became aware that their complaints reflected a recent consciousness awakening among the Ashéninka that the ill-treatment they were experiencing was wrong and unlawful, and that indigenous people actually had rights to territory,

education, health services, and to form communities of their own with a measure of autonomy in governing themselves.

The news that Indians had rights seemed miraculous to many Ashéninka. They had been lead to believe that the power to command and control native persons belonged to nonnative nationals, be they Andean settlers or mestizos from other parts of the country. This news had spread over the vast Gran Pajonal region from a series of meetings where Miguel Camaiteri and other leaders had lectured on Peruvian legislation. Settlers only became aware of these meetings as the Ashéninka whom they employed started to make demands for better payment and written contracts on the terms of work. Even more threatening to the settlers, the Ashéninka now even claimed rights of ownership to crops and land. As settlers started to realize the central role played by Miguel Camaiteri in spreading information about indigenous rights, some of them accused him of being a communist agitator and reported him to the police in Satipo, the provincial capital. They denounced him as a criminal and a subversive and accused him of planning an Indian uprising. This only made Miguel even more determined to continue what he had started.

By April 1987, I had been in the Gran Pajonal for some eighteen months, and was gradually becoming aware of the subtle influence of this one man. However, his exact role was not entirely clear to me. I knew of the frequent gatherings of many Ashéninka in the large compound of his older brother Nico, who had been living in Oventeni for years working for settlers. I had watched Miguel explain indigenous rights to a crowd of Ashéninka and I knew he was constantly traveling far and wide within the Gran Pajonal and beyond. He was also in contact with public authorities in Satipo and elsewhere, and he often met with indigenous leaders from the regional organizations that had developed in other parts of the Selva Central from the late 1970s onwards. Still, I had only a vague idea of who he really was and what made him take the risks and go through the difficulties of spearheading the process of organizing indigenous people in the Gran Pajonal. I decided that one way of understanding Miguel's role and his motivation would be to ask him to tell me his life history.

My husband and I would occasionally meet Miguel at his brother's compound on the opposite side of the Oventeni airstrip from where our rented house was located. I found him to be a soft-spoken and humble man. He had been serving as a bilingual teacher in a nearby community for a while, yet he did not consider himself a teacher. His life was dedicated to promoting indigenous organizing, and this is what he spent most of his time doing. His behavior showed none of the audacity or boldness displayed by many other Ashéninka headmen. He never stopped by our



house to solicit trade goods or to ask for medicine. He never approached patron settlers about advance payments on work contracts, nor did he ever seek their help to gain access to merchandize such as guns, ammunition, axes, machetes, knives, aluminum pots, and other items that have become necessities in Pajonal Ashéninka households (Veber 1996). When Miguel did come around our house, it was to discuss politics and to talk about possibilities for external support for his cause. He assumed responsibility for the “imagined” collectivity of the Pajonal Ashéninka. (This collectivity is “imagined” in the same way Benedict Anderson [1991:6] uses the concept, that is, imagined because the members of this collectivity will never know most of their fellow-members.) To the extent that there exists an imagined community on the part of the scattered and independent-minded Ashéninka, it is undoubtedly the result of the recent organizing encouraged by Miguel and others (Veber 1998; see also Veber 1999).<sup>7</sup> Apart from encouraging the formation of *comunidades nativas*, Miguel found ways to secure bilingual schooling for all of the Ashéninka children, the majority of whom did not know enough Spanish to benefit from the education offered in the Oventeni public school or who simply lived too far away from the settler colony to be able to enroll, had they wished to do so.

Miguel was painfully aware that, through all his efforts to obtain a few improvements for the Pajonal Ashéninka, he had become the favorite object of hate for settlers who had planned their future with an eye towards the gains to be made from cheap Ashéninka labor. These settlers realized that well-organized Ashéninka, with even a minimum of education, would turn into defiant field hands demanding not only higher pay, but land rights and other rights of citizenship. With settlers then numbering only a few hundred persons—a small minority against some four or five thousand Ashéninka—it was obvious that such a development would mean the end of both settler hegemony in the Gran Pajonal and of settler dreams of territorial expansion and future wealth. In a vain effort to prevent further Ashéninka empowerment, settlers declared Miguel Camaiteri to be a subversive rebel and a drug trafficker who was sponsored by foreign interests. In the context of these rumors, Miguel knew he was risking his life by continuing to organize the Ashéninka. For a long time he had kept a low profile *vis-à-vis* the settlers. However, by 1987 lying low was no longer an option. A process of indigenous land titling was about to begin. A major development scheme, the Pichis-Palcazu Special Project,<sup>8</sup> had agreed to allocate funds for demarcation of indigenous lands in the Gran Pajonal.

Tension among the settlers was great. Meanwhile, a tacit conviction



had developed among the Ashéninka that they now held the strongest position. By this time, twenty-two *comunidades nativas* had been formed, a few had already been legally recognized and titled with assistance from the SIL. The rest were about to go through the process, and more *comunidades nativas* were still being formed. Settlers would soon find themselves enclosed within a tiny area on the regional map, completely surrounded by large indigenous land holdings that would impede any expansion of the cattle ventures through which they hoped to dominate the region. They were furious. The Peruvian state was compelled to fly a highly placed representative of the Ministry of Agriculture into Oventeni to lecture the settlers on indigenous rights and on their duties as Peruvian citizens to respect the country's legislation. This left the settlers even more frustrated. Their world was being turned upside down.

I suggested to Miguel that he allow me to tape-record his story. He immediately agreed and we had our first recording session on April 6, 1987. By this time, he had thought carefully about what should go into his account. I had imagined a story that would include details of his personal life, his work, getting married, and moving between different communities in the Selva Central, Peru's central forest region. But Miguel chose his own particular focus. The story he gave me turned out to be the story of Miguel Camaiteri as a political activist. He wanted the world to know of the abuses suffered by the Ashéninka at the hands of settlers in the Gran Pajonal. He also wanted to establish his own role as a key person in bringing about changes in the situation, changes that would benefit "our fellow countrymen," (which, significantly, is what "Ashéninka" literally means).

### MIGUEL CAMAITERI'S STORY

This section begins with an excerpt from Miguel's story describing how he became an organizer and the "defense secretary" in the Gran Pajonal of the 1980s.

Growing up in Oventeni I witnessed the outrages committed by the settlers against our native people. I saw how they were being seized and carried off, hung up and whipped. And apart from being punished, they were being forced to work. When the Catholic Mission was here, the authorities sent the sheriff out to get indigenous children for the Mission school. Sometimes the parents did not want their children to come and live here. They missed their children and besides, they needed their help at home. The Oventeni authorities claimed these abuses were being perpetuated in order for the

children to learn Spanish and become civilized. But, in the end, this is not at all what resulted from this. The way the parents saw it, their children were simply being kidnapped. As a consequence, some parents committed suicide by poisoning themselves after their children had been taken from them to be brought up at the Mission. They could not think of anything else to do and they had no idea what was going to happen here in Oventeni. And, as I was witnessing all this, being just a small boy, I could not understand why these abuses took place. Later, after I had left in 1967 or 1966 and was working in Puerto Ocopa in the Mission helping my godmother tending her fields, I developed the idea that, once I had grown up, I would return to Oventeni to defend the rights of my fellow Ashéninka. And this is what I am doing now. I am more or less confronting all these problems that are troubling us.

As I listened to Miguel's story, I was surprised by the extent to which he had thought everything through and reconstructed his entire life around the singular purpose of liberating his fellow Ashéninka from settler oppression. He was born for this, he said. Miguel clearly needed the world to know about his accomplishments, the sufferings of the past, and the acts of liberation he was engineering. Future leaders would be able to learn from his experiences. Therefore, he liked the idea that his story might be published. Besides, he reasoned, if he became well known in Peru, his enemies might start having second thoughts about killing him.

Despite his earlier enthusiasm, getting Miguel to continue telling his story after that first session turned out to be difficult. He failed to show up two days later for a second scheduled session. "He had gone fishing in a far away river, the Unini," his relatives reported. This news was surprising to me, considering the impending arrival of a team of project consultants. These consultants would initiate work on registration and demarcation of the recently formed *comunidades nativas*. When Miguel showed up three days later with a load of smoked fish, the consultants had already arrived. The next day, Miguel took off with two of them, heading in the direction from which he had just returned. I could only guess at the motive behind his unexpected urge to go fishing. One day he would be there, and by the next, he would vanish, only to show up again when least expected. His brothers insisted his unpredictability helped keep him safe.

We finished the second life history interview two weeks later. By then, Miguel had other things on his mind and was not in a mood to go into details he considered irrelevant to the larger point he wanted to make. I left the Gran Pajonal a month later, and, following short-term field trips to two Ashéninka settlements on tributaries to the Ucayali, returned home to Denmark.

For the next seven years a civil war made the areas of my fieldwork inaccessible and prevented me from working further on Miguel's story.

Later, other circumstances kept me from returning to the field. But, over the years Miguel kept asking about the fate of his story. He wanted it made public. It was not until 2004 that I was able to return to follow up on it. By then, he was ready to relate a few details about what had occurred during the years of war. He showed up for the first session we had agreed upon and then missed the next, and the next. The old pattern of his behavior continued. I found myself with many hours of tape recordings and uncoordinated sections of narrative that covered different aspects of Miguel's life as an indigenous activist. These recordings offer access to the thought process of a leader. Miguel's statements reflect a conscious, if subjective, attempt to construct and shape his version of sociopolitical reality as he wants it to be understood. The narration also begs the interpretation of this ethnographer.

### **MIGUEL'S STORY INTERPRETED I: LEARNING TO LEAD**

Miguel's story is an account of his motivation for assuming a position of leadership in the movement to free the Ashéninka from settler domination. He repeatedly returns to the fact that, as a young child, he witnessed many injustices committed against his people. As a person who spent his entire youth among nonnatives, bearing witness in this way rhetorically connects him to the Pajonal Ashéninka and their need for liberation. He was there, and he saw what happened. His narrative also establishes his legitimacy as a local, one who was born and raised in the Gran Pajonal. His position stands in opposition to that of any outsider, who would be suspected of being out to take personal advantage of the situation.

It is difficult for me to make sense of Miguel's claim of having decided, as a child, to return as a liberator of his people. Rather than interpreting this claim as an actual childhood recollection, I believe that it is most likely a product of Miguel's need to "ground" his activism historically. Several statements in the narrative suggest this to me. These statements relate more to the circumstances of the telling of the narrative, rather than to the specific historical events he is narrating.

Going beyond the information offered in the narrative, I believe that one likely source of Miguel's anger concerning abuses in Oventeni and his determination to make something of his life was the influence of his godmother during his childhood. Although his narrative devotes few words to his godmother, Señora Rosa, her influence on Miguel's eventual activist persona may well have been considerable. After all, Miguel spent some ten years of his life with her in the 1950s and 1960s. Two decades later, I had

the pleasure of getting to know her well when I lived in Oventeni. I took all my meals in her house. She made a modest living cooking and serving food to itinerants and resident singles, including visiting anthropologists and young teachers contracted for short-term positions at the Oventeni school.

Orphaned at an early age, Miguel and his younger brother were raised by Señora Rosa, a woman of mixed Yine<sup>9</sup> and Spanish descent. Her husband had been a trader and one of the early settlers in Oventeni. Señora Rosa never had children of her own, but over the years she had taken countless Ashéninka children into her care, raising them well, and making sure they attended classes regularly in Oventeni's public school. She was a devout Catholic and believed firmly in the equal value of every human being, whether mestizo, indigenous Amazonian, or other. This belief was not generally shared by the settlers, many of whom were convinced that the native Ashéninka were inferior human creatures, useful for hard work and not much else. Some believed that the Ashéninka had the mental capacity for civilization and that, if they wanted to or were given the opportunity, they might actually catch up with settlers. As they saw it, the problem was that most Ashéninka did not want civilization. In this view, the Ashéninka thus found themselves in dire straits, and they had only themselves to blame. Señora Rosa shared the latter conviction. Therefore, she taught her Ashéninka foster children the importance of education and civilized conduct. As far as she was concerned, alcoholism, violence, exploitation, and abuse of other human beings were not part of civilized conduct. From her perspective, the bulk of settlers in Oventeni fell rather short of the benchmarks of civilized behavior.

Considering the attitudes of Oventeni settlers towards the indigenous Ashéninka, it may be no surprise that Señora Rosa's foster children, once they had finished school and were expected to provide for themselves, either went back into the forest to live with Ashéninka relatives or left the region altogether to explore the world and find livable alternatives for themselves outside of the Gran Pajonal. Miguel chose the latter strategy. In an interview conducted with him in 2004, he put it thus:

I wanted to educate myself, prepare myself. To do that, I had to work. There was no one to help me. I was on my own. If I did not work, there was no education. I would have had to look after cattle and tend fields for the rest of my life. I had to get out of there. I had finished primary school and I wanted to go on educating myself.

He goes on to explain how he moved on. In summary, Miguel learned from his friends about the military, an ever-present option used by boys,

and sometimes girls, to escape a life of hopeless poverty.

At the age of 18, Miguel enrolled in the Peruvian military on a voluntary basis. It suited him well and he spent more than four years with the infantry, ultimately rising to the rank of sergeant. When he resigned in the early 1970s, he came back to Oventeni, but he did not like it there anymore. He had become accustomed to a different type of environment, he explained. He soon found work logging in the neighboring area of Satipo. At this time, he took no interest whatsoever in indigenous issues. He was aware that organizing was going on among the Asháninka in the region, but he did not care. His narrative clearly explains that he believed it was none of his business. Yet, his talents did not go unnoticed by the indigenous leaders in the area and his recruitment for leadership, I believe, was inevitable.

The early 1970s was a time of change in Peru. The leftist reform-oriented government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado had seized power in 1968. New legislation was being passed to improve conditions for the country's rural poor, including the indigenous people of the Amazon lowlands. The government had created a special agency—Sistema Nacional de Movilización, SINAMOS (National System of Social Mobilization)—to promote indigenous organizing. It informed people about the new Law of Native Communities (Decree Law 20653, passed in 1974) and the advantages it offered. Because he had four years of military training, Miguel was considered well educated by any local standards. He soon found himself invited by the leaders of an Asháninka community in the Satipo region, Yavirironi, to act as their representative at a meeting called by the SINAMOS in Huancayo, the administrative center of the Department of Junín that includes most of the central forest region. This meeting was apparently Miguel's introduction to indigenous politics. He recounted, in the life-history interview of 1987, his experience of it in some detail:

They made me a delegate. They provided me with credentials saying that I would be working for the community and they made me attend a seminar in Huancayo. We left for Huancayo that same night with sixty two other delegates representing the different native communities. We arrived in Huancayo the following day at the seminar. The people from the SINAMOS were there, the leaders, the chairmen, and many more waiting for us. Then we began, and this was the first time ever I was representing a community. I did not know much about the laws of native communities. And so we started the seminar. Some leaders more or less knew about the laws of native communities and they began to talk. They talked and they talked, claiming their rights, saying that we used to have a law that was the same for settlers and

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peasant communities in the highlands. Obviously I listened carefully to all of the leaders and to the delegates from every community, their expositions and the claims they were making. And well, at this time I also spoke some words but I was not very well acquainted with the laws and all of the problems of the communities, as I had only just started to get to know what a community was all about. After three days the seminar ended. And having been at the seminar, I was provided with full credentials as a community delegate. As such, they told me, I was the one who had to find out about their problems and travel around to deal with any cases that might need attention. And then I returned to Yavirironi. At a meeting I told them everything I had learned at the seminar. I informed the community and then, the following week, we began to work.

Miguel did not offer any details about the type of work he initiated. He quickly moved on to explain that he soon got into trouble with other leaders, or men who aspired to become leaders in Yavirironi. Referring to Miguel, they told people that “this person who has come from the outside should not be directing us because we have people from among our own who can be our leaders!” Miguel went on to explain:

They did not like my work and the things I was doing. We had a discussion and they told me, “You have come from far away and you are subduing us, putting the people to work!” But my duty there was to make the community members work together. This is what they told me at the seminar. This was my duty and I had to fulfill it.

Miguel saw no solution to the conflict and he chose to quit. He left the community and went back to find work among the settlers.

In retrospect this brief drama appears to be crucial to Miguel’s development as a leader. This is probably why he takes the trouble to explain it in some detail. Yet, his narrative requires further clarification. Although the problem focuses on the fact that Miguel has come to Yavirironi from the outside, this is hardly a sufficient explanation for the criticism. Many successful native leaders have originated outside of the communities where they serve as leaders. Miguel’s own words, however, suggest the nature of the problem that moves him to resign. He is being blamed for “putting the people to work” and “subduing us.” At the time, he apparently perceived it to be his duty to “put people to work,” a position originating with those he considered his sponsors, the SINAMOS, an state agency that promoted community development. Miguel appears to have thought of himself first as acting on behalf of the SINAMOS, rather than the community. In this role, he did not see himself as principally there to represent the community, or to carry out decisions made by its members. Rather, he was making the



community comply with decisions made by SINAMOS.

Recently discharged from the army, it seems that Miguel continued to embody a military ethos of giving and taking orders. Such comportment would hardly be acceptable in a native community of Asháninka that is accustomed to charismatic informal leadership by men, and occasionally women. Traditional leaders lead by subtle persuasion and by good example. Besides, from his Oventeni childhood, Miguel had been made to believe that indigenous people were unfit for making political decisions, unless they were acculturated *civilizados*. Miguel had been chosen for leadership because of his military education and his knowledge of mestizo ways. Now, in the Yavirironi context, these very capabilities got in his way. He had to learn the Asháninka style of leadership.

He soon had another chance to find a more appropriate *modus operandi* as a community leader when another Asháninka community, Pampuriani, which is located in the Perené, invited him in. This time Miguel apparently had learned his lesson and managed to become a successful leader. He helped to solve problems with settlers who had invaded community lands and he secured the allocation of a public school teacher for the community.

## MIGUEL'S STORY INTERPRETED II: RETURN OF THE LIBERATOR

Miguel goes on to explain how he eventually returned to Oventeni. He repeats the tale of settler abuses and his childhood decision to return to liberate his people:

I said to myself, "No, I have to do something for my fellow Ashéninka. I have to return to my home area and to Oventeni where many problems exist!" Then in 1979, I went to visit my family who lived here. I stayed in Oventeni with them for two months. I saw my brother. I saw all the problems that were troubling them. It was even worse than it had been when I left because more ambitious settlers kept coming and still more abuses were committed against my fellow Ashéninka. So I looked it over, met all the people, saw what was being done to them, saw those who had been beaten, and all the problems they were having. Sometimes the Ashéninka fought among themselves, and they were seized and locked up in prison, hung up and whipped. They did all kinds of things to them. And they made them work tied up in chains. And I said: "What is this? When is this ever going to stop?" My brothers Nicolás and Pascual said to me, "Instead of helping other communities, why not come back here to help us because we are suffering so many abuses and injustices and our fields are being taken from us?" And, as my brother was facing all



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of these problems taking place, I agreed to stay. Since early childhood I had known these things, the injustices in this village of Oventeni, and so I decided to stay, and I told them, "I will come and organize my fellow countrymen here and form a defense, like an organization or a center!" So, I carried this decision here. I came here after having lived outside for a long time. And I had come to visit here for only two months and then I returned, longing to organize communities and work with my own people in this region.

There is no reason to doubt Miguel's intentions of organizing the indigenous Pajonalinos and trying to end settler abuses. But why should this idea suddenly make him decide to give up a good life in Pumpuriani, where he was head of the community, and come back to live in Oventeni, a place he had so disliked when returning to visit on previous occasions? The importance I attribute to Miguel's statement that he saw his brother needs to be considered in light of other events not included in this narrative that were occurring around the same time he came back to live in Oventeni.

In 1979 and 1980, German filmmaker Werner Herzog was in the Peruvian Amazon shooting footage for *Fitzcarraldo*, his film about the infamous rubber baron Carlos Fermín Fitzcarrald who in 1894, had orchestrated the hauling of a large motored boat across the isthmus separating two great river systems, the Urubamba and the Madre de Dios. The operation had lasted more than two months and required the labor of a thousand Indians and more than two hundred whites. Herzog had managed to contract hundreds of Pajonal Ashéninka as extras, and Miguel Camaiteri and his brothers Nicolás and Pascual were among them. When not being interviewed, Miguel was happy to talk about the experiences he and his brothers had filming. We went through their collection of photos taken on the location. Unfortunately, Nicolás suffered a serious injury in a plane crash in Oventeni as the filming was coming to an end. The injury left him paralyzed from the waist down. He died in 1989 from kidney failure resulting from his condition. According to the Camaiteri brothers and the American SIL missionaries, the aircraft—contracted for the filmmaking operation—had been sabotaged by settlers before takeoff from Oventeni and this had caused the crash immediately after the plane had become airborne. Settlers were furious that their Ashéninka labor left for the highly paid work provided by Herzog, and believed that they would return with demands for equally good pay if the settlers wanted their land cleared by Ashéninka hands.

With Nicolás disabled and in a wheelchair, who would be there to defend him and prevent his fields from being taken by settlers? Nicolás' accident may have been the event that convinced Miguel to return to Oventeni. He may have realized that if he had to defend his brother, he

might as well defend every other Pajonal Ashéninka at the same time. He could clean up the mess that the settlers had made of Oventeni. Miguel might have thought that he could bring about development and progress for the destitute, as SINAMOS had envisioned, by helping the Ashéninka, as well as allied settlers and individuals of mixed ancestry, living in the Gran Pajonal.

Miguel does not mention his brother's disability in his narrative. Nicolás' accident resulted from settler malice. His need for someone to defend him arose from the same source, that is, settler greed and the awareness that they could take advantage of his weakness, if they had an opportunity to do so. For the purpose of telling his story, Miguel's reference to settler abuses as a historical fact provides sufficient justification for his stated decision to help end the oppression of the Ashéninka. Besides, by not mentioning his brother's disability and the way this may have influenced his homecoming, Miguel is rhetorically able to situate himself more clearly as part of the imagined collectivity of Pajonal Ashéninka.

Situating himself within the collectivity in this manner authenticates his claim to leadership in a way that emphasizing his duty to help his brother would not. After all, Miguel could not risk being identified as just another Ashéninka *civilizado* who had showed up to take over for his brother. He was very much aware that among the illiterate, monolingual Pajonal Ashéninka of the 1980s, the notion of *civilizado* did not simply refer to "a native who speaks Spanish." It also carried connotations of "immorality" of indigenous persons who ally with settlers and turn against their own (see Veber 1998). Miguel needed to put distance between himself and this negative image of the *civilizado*. His story includes mention of individuals who fit into this category. It stresses the futility in their aversion to becoming part of the Ashéninka organization and pretending that *civilizados* are superior to other Pajonal Ashéninka. From informal conversations outside of the interview context, it seemed that Miguel had realized—undoubtedly from his Army experience—that there is no running away from your background or who you are. Perhaps this is why, as an adult, he acquired a facial tattoo—a straight blue line running horizontally across his face at nose-level—of a style normally only seen among older Pajonal Ashéninka. Today, most Ashéninka are satisfied painting the straight blue line across their faces when they need to look their best. Miguel is one of the few who have had this evidence of his indigenous identity permanently inscribed on his skin. And so, in this way, Miguel claims genuine Pajonal Ashéninka identity. On this basis, he presents himself as born of the group and as the leader it needs:

I have fought for all of my fellow Ashéninka, not for the love of money or for

personal gain. Indeed, I was born for this, for defending them ... because the leader emerges from within the group when there is a need for him. He is born from the group to take care of its problems.

Miguel uses the Spanish verbs “*nacer*” (to be born, to appear) and “*surgir*” (to spring up, arise) to explain the role of the leader and the organization as products of the collectivity, that is, not as the work of any one individual or a handful of individuals. He returns to this theme several times throughout his story and he explains in some detail how difficult it was for him initially to gain the confidence of the Pajonalinos and to get them to trust him and look to him for advice and leadership. He had to prove himself by producing tangible results for the common good. At the time of the 1987 interview, bilingual schools were the first tangible results that he had helped to orchestrate. Land titling would come quickly thereafter, and so would formal recognition of the Organización Ashéninka del Gran Pajonal (OAGP). Over the next few years Miguel would find himself heading his own army, and consolidating his position as leader and liberator of the Gran Pajonal.

In December of 1988, a group of *senderistas*, members of the Maoist-inspired terrorist group of the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) made an incursion into Oventeni, looting and threatening specific individuals. Miguel was attending a meeting elsewhere and was not present in Oventeni on this occasion. Expensive equipment, including medicine and solar panels for the radio belonging to the indigenous organization, was stolen from his house. Apart from general fright, no one was harmed. The incident was taken as a warning of what could come next. The Peruvian military declared the region an emergency zone. The Ashéninka were aware that *senderistas* were responsible for cruelties and for the killings of native Ashéninka in the Ene River Valley to the south. They clearly saw the need to prevent a recurrence of this situation in the Gran Pajonal.

Miguel then made an important move. Having secured the consent of the headmen within the OAGP, he set up an Ashéninka “Army for Self Defense” to confront the *senderistas* and secure Ashéninka control of the Gran Pajonal. But first, he duly informed the military commander in the Mazamari headquarters in the neighboring zone of Pangoa of his intention, asking the military to authorize the Ashéninka militia as a “*ronda indígena*” (indigenous defense patrol).<sup>10</sup> In this way, Miguel obtained legitimacy for his action. Besides, he expected that the existence of an Ashéninka self defense army would allow the Peruvian military to excuse itself from making its appearance in the zone, a move that would force the Ashéninka to abandon their homes and their lands for security reasons. The measure simultaneously served as a message that the Pajonal Ashéninka were in

no way aligned with the terrorists, which assured that settlers would not be able to use that sort of accusation as a pretext for taking possession of lands titled to indigenous communities. By 1994, the Ashéninka army, in conjunction with the Peruvian armed forces, had expelled the *senderistas* from the region, although not without loss of life on both sides. Having defeated the *senderistas*, the Pajonal Ashéninka proceeded to take control of local politics, a role that had been previously the privilege of mestizo settlers (for further details see Hvalkof 1994, 1998).

### THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE AS POLITICAL STATEMENT

Miguel represents a new type of self-made leader in the Amazonian context. His role and function is unlike that of the traditional headman or the local community leader, who are heads of large extended families that tend to form “core” groups around which other households congregate. These headmen are primarily charismatic leaders who lead by example and their ability to produce solidarity and consent within the group (Veber 1998). Such local leaders continue to be important to Pajonal Ashéninka social organization, and with the formation of legally recognized *comunidades nativas* they are often the ones who take on the formal function of *jefe de la comunidad* (community chief). Miguel is not a traditional local leader of this sort. He has no personal following and no family apart from his one remaining brother. Moreover, his wife is an Asháninka from a different region. Miguel never had people—neither family nor followers—for whom he was responsible in the way local headmen or chiefs more typically were. Miguel’s aspiration from the start was to become a leader who would coordinate and unite all of the local communities of the Gran Pajonal in an organization that would represent them as one united collectivity. This would facilitate communication with public authorities, allow for coordination of development plans, and help the local communities resist pressures from settlers. Miguel would be part of a new leadership at this supralocal level. With the formation of the OAGP in the 1980s, his vision started to become a reality. With the organization of the Ashéninka army, Miguel had a chance to demonstrate real strength and obtain greater political control in Oventeni.

To understand more fully Miguel’s perception of his role as leader, it is important to consider the type of audience to which his words were directed. In the interview situation, the anthropologist is obviously an interlocutor, yet Miguel was always very conscious of the fact that his

story would eventually be read by a wider group of people. From the text, certain cues indicate who his anticipated audience might be. His frequent use of reported speech, for example, activates other indigenous leaders and his brothers, as well as public officials, foreign missionaries, and other outside sympathizers. In the context of the narrative, they are the ones who are empowered to speak and with whom he has conversations. He is conscious of the need for their moral and financial support in linking the transformative efforts of the Ashéninka with international strategies for local participatory development. It is to this mixed audience that his story is directed, not the Pajonal Ashéninka, who are unlikely to read it anyway. Younger Ashéninka will, however, read his story. So might future indigenous leaders who may learn from Miguel's experiences. Accordingly, the story employs language and expressions used among indigenous activists, particularly that used to refer to the abuse of indigenous people, government neglect, and the need to organize for indigenous rights (see also Warren 1998; Muehlebach 2001; Aylwin 2004). Moral exhortations are equally present in the narrative. They stress the importance of being trustworthy as a leader, working for the common good, respecting the wishes of the people, going easy on competitive or inept fellow leaders, and never acting selfishly.

Listing these virtues as part of his acquired qualities serves to demonstrate Miguel's maturity and legitimacy as an indigenous leader. In this sense, Miguel's story comes close to being the story of the indigenous hero he would like to be: the orphaned boy who ventures into the world to learn important secrets, but eventually returns to his own people to liberate them from oppression. Yet, neither the innocent giftedness of Luke Skywalker nor the isolated bravery of the Lone Ranger is at work in this tale in which community prevails over the individual. Miguel's narrative is a moral vision predicated on a vibrant sense of community. Hence, in representing the trials and tribulations in his struggle for leadership and organization, what initially appeared to be an individualistic autobiography or a celebration of the self, turns out to be an invocation of "groupness," a discovery of tradition, and a recognition of ethnic identity. Embracing a space between the personal and the political, Miguel Camaiteri's narrative permits a closeup perception of the lively interplay between given structures and visions of change, with the acting individual as the dynamic axis that sets the story in motion and gives it direction.

When I met Miguel again in 2004, he had served two terms as the *alcalde* (elected mayor) of Oventeni and also moved on to become *regidor* (a sort of councilor) in Atalaya, a small town on the confluence of the rivers Tambo and Urubamba where they unite to form the Ucayali. In

response to the demands of the Pajonal Ashéninka, jurisdiction of the Gran Pajonal had been transferred in the 1990s from Satipo where public administration favored settler interests, to Atalaya, where public administrators were less predictable in their attitudes. Miguel had been voted into office for APRA (the populist Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana), a Peruvian political party sometimes likened to the social democratic parties of European countries, but that has also relied on highly organized and violent militias. In the 1980s, the staff of the Ministry of Agriculture's Satipo office had actively encouraged Oventeni settlers to disregard Ashéninka claims to land rights, including for fields under cultivation. They had all been members of APRA. Now, Miguel had signed up with APRA himself. I asked him what was he doing there and he shrugged, laughed, and said: "Of course I am not *aprista*!" I could only guess at the things he was busy learning as a nonaprista within the APRA party. Peruvian politics is certainly not the business of angels. To be an indigenous leader who seeks results may well require insider knowledge of the ways this shady business works. If anybody was capable of making it work for the indigenous cause, Miguel would be the one to do it, but only time will tell. Miguel says he will return again to Oventeni once his term in Atalaya is over. Maybe he will.

**Postscript:** As of 2007, Miguel's term as *regidor* in Atalaya had expired and he had returned to his home in the Gran Pajonal. Suffering from a new attack of tuberculosis, Miguel was undergoing medical treatment. He had retired from active leadership in the OAGP, the presidency of which had passed to a son-in-law of Miguel's younger brother, Pascual Camaiteri. The young president was being closely supervised by the older leaders, the Camaiteri brothers, to ensure political continuity within the organization.

## NOTES

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1. Here, I follow Suzanne Oakdale's use of the term autobiographical narrative (2005:9). See also Cain (1991:238).

2. In 2004 and 2005 I did a second series of interviews with Miguel. In the second series of interviews his personal motivations are not as central a concern. In these later interviews, he focuses on the events and circumstances leading to the



creation of the Pajonal Ashéninka Self-Defense Army and its campaign against the Sendero Luminoso in the early 1990s. The story explains what he was doing, how he was doing it, and why. This story is important and exciting in its own right and merits a separate paper.

3. Oventeni settlers do not constitute a homogenous group. A small elite among them is composed of ambitious individuals whose aim in life is to get rich and to do it fast. Controlling local political power, this elite was responsible for most of the abuses of Ashéninka labor. Other settlers were less conflicted in their attitudes towards the Ashéninka and preferred peaceful coexistence to expansive confrontations. For this same reason, they were not capable of raising their voice or going against the dominant elite.

4. As the natural grasses of the Pajonal are not good as pasture, cattle ranching in the Gran Pajonal was profitable only to the settlers who were able to take advantage of the cheap labor of the local Ashéninka in planting grasses apt for fodder (Hvalkof 1989).

5. Around 1980, a new set of SIL missionaries arrived in the Gran Pajonal. They took an active interest in community development and provided valuable assistance to Ashéninka organizing efforts.

6. Mine was a field study of intercultural relations between the Pajonal Ashéninka and settlers done in cooperation with my husband, anthropologist Søren Hvalkof. The project was entitled "Campa Cultural Identity and the frontier of Development." It was carried out over a period of twenty-two months between October 1985 and October 1987 supported through grants from the Council for Development Research (RUF) of the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and the Danish Research Council for the Humanities (Veber 1989). Søren Hvalkof's project was funded by the Council for Development Research and the Danish Council for Research in the Social Sciences (See also Hvalkof 1985).

7. The Pajonal Ashéninka self-identify as *queshiijatzí* ("people of the grasslands"). They share a specific local dialect and certain cultural features that distinguish them from the Ashéninka and Asháninka of neighboring regions. However, they have never had a common leadership and have never been united as a group for religious or other purposes (Hvalkof and Veber 2005). Until the creation of the OAGP (the Pajonal Ashéninka Organization) their level of incorporation was more abstract than at the level of a concrete association or a community (Eriksen: 2002:40–44).

8. The Pichis-Palcazu Special Project was initiated in 1980 with funding from USAID, the Interamerican Development Bank, the World Bank, and three European governments. Originally intended to cover only the regions of Palcazu, Pichis, Oxapampa, and Satipo-Chanchamayo, the Satipo-Chanchamayo part of the project was extended to the Gran Pajonal in 1987 for purposes of demarcation of the native communities (for details see Hvalkof 1998).

9. An indigenous population of the Upper Ucayali and the Lower Urubamba rivers, the Yine were formerly known as *Piro* in the ethnographic literature.

10. "Rondas" had been legalized by a 1986 decree (no. 24571) to permit



Andean peasants to patrol their lands in an effort to limit cattle rustling, as well as *senderista* activities. When native Amazonians started to organize self-defense patrols for similar reasons, the law was applied to them as well. In the 1990s, “rondas” had been renamed as “Self-Defense Committees” overseen by the military (see also Starn 1999).

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